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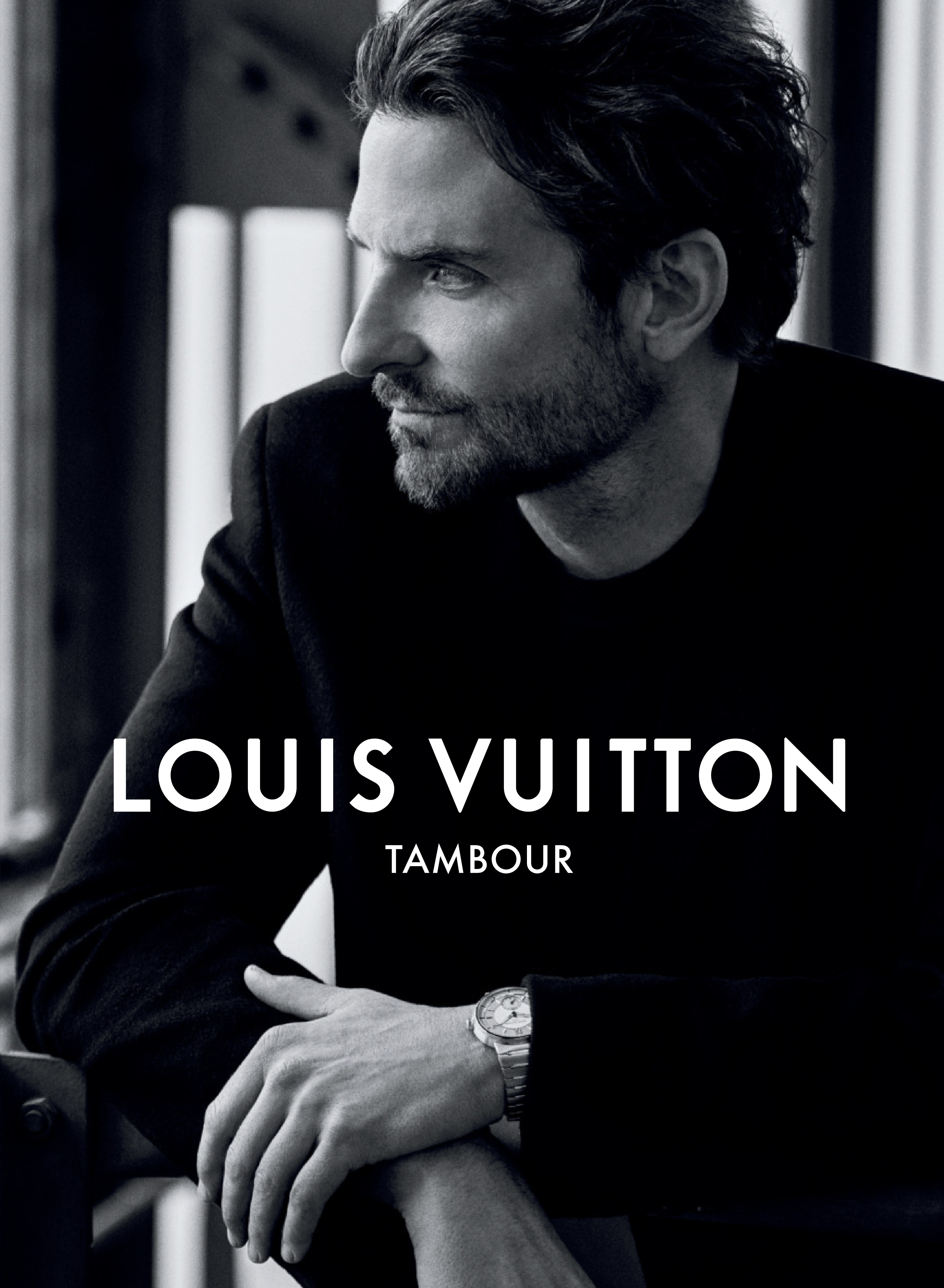
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THE NEW YORKER
FALL STYLE & DESIGN

SEPTEMBER 25, 2023

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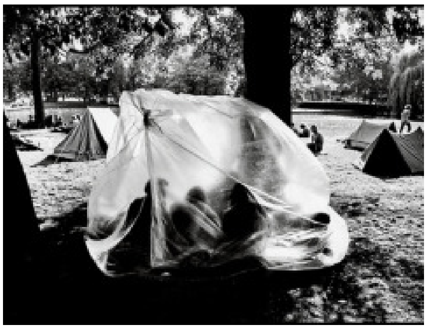
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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



THE WEEKEND ESSAY
David Owen untangles the mystery of a boy who vanished from his summer camp in the sixties.



THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW
Michael Schulman speaks with John Waters about his long career as a cinematic provocateur.

LEFT: GILLES PERESS / MAGNUM; RIGHT: DAMIEN MALONEY

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THE MAIL

MOZART FOR ALL

"Requiem" was the perfect way to title Alex Ross's piece about the end of Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival (Musical Events, August 28th). I found the festival, which ran for more than five decades, to be consistently wonderful. I appreciated its expansive combination of selections: Mozart, of course, but also Zimmermann, Oliveros, Varèse, and various avant-gardists. The festival encompassed dance, opera, and theatre from many eras and many places. I can't understand why Lincoln Center's team would choose to end it. In my view, the "swerve toward pop" that Ross describes is not an appropriate way to redress classical music's history of exclusivity.

The implication of "Summer for the City"'s programming appears to be that people from particular backgrounds primarily want to be exposed to what they're already familiar with: that Black people only want hip-hop, Latinos only want salsa, and young people only want standup and "games spaces." I feel disrespected. I am Colombian, but I don't want to hear cumbia all the time. I want to learn about and be acquainted with the unfamiliar. Minorities are complex, and are as prepared as anyone else for "an encounter with something radically other—a world distant in time or space," as Ross characterizes classical music. It is depriving people of an opportunity for such encounters, not the performance of this music, that is paternalistic and élitist.

Sol Gaitán
Cliffside Park, N.J.

BACK IN BROOKLYN

Jonathan Lethem's article about the creation of Boerum Hill made me nostalgic for my time living there ("The Invention of a Neighborhood," August 28th). In his piece, Lethem reflects on Jervis Anderson's article, published in this magazine in 1977, about the gentrification that was then unfolding on those few blocks in Brooklyn. I lived in Boerum Hill shortly after this period, from the early to mid-eighties, and had a very positive experience.

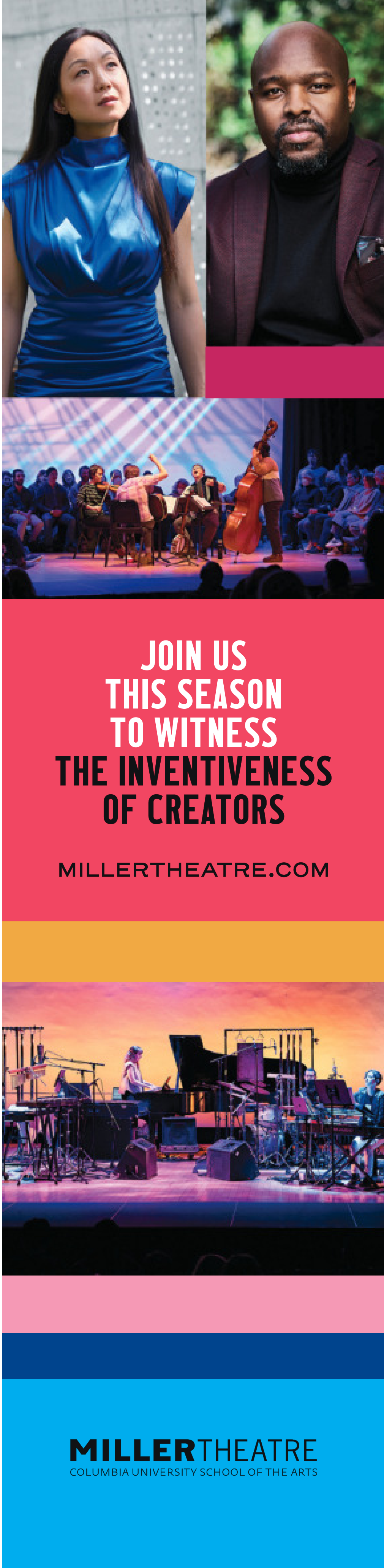
A refugee from Manhattan, I, a young white man, wanted to have more space while paying less in rent. My search brought me to what was then one of the neighborhood's ragged edges, on Dean Street between Third and Fourth Avenues. When I moved to Boerum Hill, my block was still majority Black. Around the corner from me, on Atlantic Avenue, was a slit trench of a dive bar called Erin's Own, known affectionately as the Zone. Usually, mine was the only white face in the place. A few blocks away, on Nevins Street, between Dean and Bergen, there was a very convenient storefront pot store, where my friends and I went to buy nickel and dime bags. Farther west, toward Smith Street, there were often Hispanic men in their undershirts playing games of dominoes on card tables that they set out on the street.

The characters I met in all of these places were normally open and friendly. At the time, it seemed to me that the neighborhood was a special place where divisions of race and class mattered less, or even faded away. But, as Lethem suggests in his article, this was an illusion. Walking around the neighborhood now, with all its trendy culture and pretensions, I've started to realize that the Boerum Hill I knew was destined to become a much more homogenous place. I mourn its passing, and wonder if I should not regret the small role I played in this transition.

Charles J. Doane
Portsmouth, N.H.

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GOINGS ON

SEPTEMBER 20 – 26, 2023

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

In 1948, the nascent **New York City Ballet** found its footing, becoming the company-in-residence at City Center. Before then, the future of Lincoln Kirstein's vision for a troupe centered on the works of George Balanchine had looked iffy. Seventy-five years later, the company is still kicking. The fall season, with nineteen ballets, is dedicated to Balanchine; it starts with the three-act "Jewels" (1967), set to music by Fauré, Stravinsky, and Tchaikovsky. Other performances include "Serenade" (pictured), and the program that opened N.Y.C.B.'s first season at City Center, a showcase of Mr. B.'s range: the rigor of "Concerto Barocco," the emotional depth of "Orpheus," and the luminosity of "Symphony in C."—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre, Sept. 19-Oct. 15.)*



ERIN BAIANO

ABOUT TOWN

PODCAST | Like its mock-heroic title, the splashy new Spotify podcast **"Strike Force Five,"** accented by mock-majestic thunderclaps, has a frisson of the Super Friends at the Hall of Justice: five big late-night TV hosts—Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, Seth Meyers, and John Oliver—unite to do good, by raising money for their shows' staffers during the ongoing W.G.A. strike, and enjoy the glory that comes with it. It's an amiable, loosely structured gab, in which their interpersonal dynamic—mutually respectful, with liberal chops busting—provides some intrigue as they riff about strike-era news stories that they're sad to have missed (three of Trump's indictments, the Prigozhin saga, a virally slow Somalian sprinter), swap show-biz anecdotes, and, occasionally, discuss the importance of the strike.—*Sarah Larson*

CLASSICAL MUSIC | Franz Schubert wrote hundreds of lieder before his death, at the age of thirty-one. The last ones, collected and published posthumously as the "Schwanengesang" ("Swan Song"), build on archetypes of Romantic passion: red roses, treetops rustling in the moonlight, Atlas bowed beneath a world of sorrows. The German tenor Jonas Kaufmann, who performs those works with his adept accompanist, Helmut Deutsch, is renowned for his gorgeous voice. Is the music enough? **"Doppelganger,"** a new, staged version—directed by Claus Guth and billed as "part performance and part installation art"—adds a narrative (a fallen soldier sees his own ghost) to the eponymous finale, and plumps Schubert's songs with video projections, and a soundscape composed by Mathis Nitschke. Romance isn't dead yet.—*Fergus McIntosh (Park Avenue Armory Drill Hall; Sept. 22-28.)*

HOUSE MUSIC | In the past few years, African pop has been infiltrated by the sounds of amapiano, a subgenre of house music born in South Africa which features an elastic, percussive digital bass known as the log drum. One of amapiano's defining practitioners, and perhaps its greatest ambassador, is the Swazi-born d.j. and producer Lungelihle Zwane, who performs as **Uncle Waffles;** since 2021, she has spread its gospel internationally, earning signal boosts from Drake and Beyoncé in the process. The two EPs she released this year—"Asylum," from March, and "Solace," from August—display her range as a mood-setter, with tracks spanning shuffling dance-floor movers and softer, more R. & B.-adjacent wind-downs. In either state, her grooves are so infectious that even she can't resist dancing.—*Sheldon Pearce (Avant Gardner; Sept. 22.)*

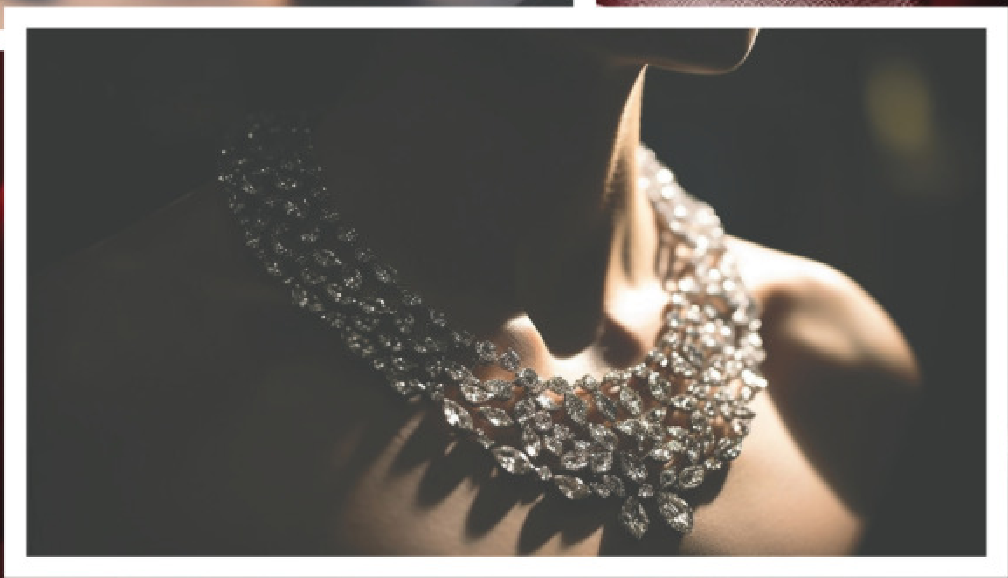
TELEVISION | Misery's the only wanted company in Hulu's **"This Fool,"** a bawdy, laugh-out-loud comedy that riffs on Black-Latinx tensions and delves into depression and its absurdities. In the first season, Julio (Chris Estrada) is a case manager at a Los Angeles nonprofit called Hugs Not Thugs—run by the righteous but unhinged Minister Payne (Michael Imperioli)—that helps former gang members reintegrate into society. Julio takes on his cousin Luis (Frankie Quiñones), just out of prison, who moves in. In the looser and more experimental new season, Hugs Not Thugs has gone under, and the men squabble over who's unhappier—with some competition from a now dissolute Minister Payne. When Julio opens a coffee shop called Mugs Not Thugs, run by ex-felons, it reactivates his savior complex, Luis's knee-jerk defensiveness, and Minister Payne's itch for redemption.—*Inkoo Kang*

MOVIES | The financial drama **"Dumb Money"** is based on the true story of retail investors' rush, in 2021, to purchase shares in GameStop, contradicting big Wall Street firms and putting several of them at risk. A Massachusetts-based financial analyst named Keith Gill (Paul Dano), who's also a social-media influencer called Roaring Kitty, prompts the buying frenzy, partly as a rebuke to institutional investors such as Gabe Plotkin (Seth Rogen), who'd been shorting the stock. When it skyrockets, Gabe risks losing billions—and Keith and the many small investors who've joined him (such as a nurse, played by America Ferrera) stand to win big. The movie, directed by Craig Gillespie, is better at explaining financial abstractions than at developing characters; it's nonetheless a gleeful romp through strange and treacherous territory.—*Richard Brody*

MOVIES | There's a fascinating quasi-documentary aspect to **"Cassandro,"** a heartfelt but largely methodical bio-pic about the *lucha libre* wrestler Saúl Armendáriz, who competed under the stage name of the title. The film, directed by Roger Ross Williams, shows Saúl (played with fierce purpose and lacerating wit by Gael García Bernal) crafting the character of Cassandro, an *exótico*, a wrestler who performs in drag. Working hard with a new trainer (Roberta Colindrez), Saúl decides to become the first *exótico*—traditionally the sport's patsy—who wins. The movie reveals the athleticism and unscripted danger of a spectacle often considered mere showmanship. Saúl is a gay man who has had to face prejudice in his family and in the world, and his battle for respect in the ring is depicted as a crucial part of his wider quest.—*Richard Brody*

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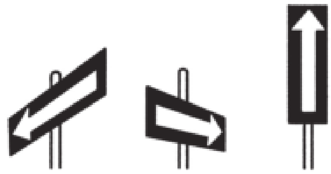
New York is a phenomenal restaurant city, but rarely is it a thrillingly innovative one. As usual, we can blame capital: the cost of operating a food business in this viciously expensive town makes risktaking far too risky. So it's exhilarating to have a meal that's genuinely interesting. At Foxface Natural, a chic little restaurant in the East Village, the owners, Sivan Lahat and Ori Kushnir, are doing something almost rebellious in their apparent lack of regard for trends, or social media, or financial success.

The secret to this creative freedom is, let's be plain, more capital. Lahat and Kushnir are devoted gastronomes; they're also former techies who earned enough money to quit their day jobs and opened an idiosyncratic sandwich shop called Foxface—because they wanted to, and because they could—which became famous partly on the strength of a camel-meat pita. The sandwich shop is now closed, but the duo remains committed to menu as menagerie: at Foxface Natural, which opened this spring, you may encounter purple clams (with cucumber five ways), Boer goat (smoked, with a tomato-saffron sauce), pig's blood (a sausage filling), or gooseneck barnacles that resemble dragon claws. "Where do you source your kangaroo?" I asked recently, staring down a marsupial tartare. The ruby meat was lean and subtle, tossed with punchy slivers of pickled rhubarb, spiced intoxicatingly with coriander, fenugreek, and turmeric. (The answer, of course, is Australia.)

There are recognizable flavors at Foxface and recognizable shapes but—in the talented hands of the chef David Santos—rarely both at once. The closest the kitchen comes to convention is a hulking cross-section of striped bass that's roasted on the bone in a wood-burning oven and served over an explosively flavorful sauce inspired by *chraime*, a Sephardic tomato stew. That frizzy schnitzel adorning so many tables is a fried disk of sweetbreads, marshmallow light, adorned with chanterelles and corn—a study in yellows and golds. The pasta is a *girella:* a single, lengthy, snakelike pocket, presented in a spiral, like a jagged flower. Its fillings change; I tried it stuffed with golden tilefish, buttery and sweet, set atop a sunset-orange sweep of sauce Nantua, bathed in a tarragon broth drizzled tableside.

Foxface engages its small space with satisfying efficiency: order the sourdough, lusciously soft, presented with a plate of cultured butter and a tiny tableau of pickles, and you might see a server pull down a loaf from a ledge on the wall, where a half-dozen boules are set on their sides, like books. Other shelves display bottles from Foxface's pointedly unconventional wine list. Sitting at the dining bar one evening, I swirled a Vermentino-Moscato blend that looked like apple juice and tasted wild and metallic, like beautiful gasoline. It was strange, assured, unbothered, exquisite. *(Dishes $11-$69.)*

—Helen Rosner



PICK THREE

The staff writer Naomi Fry on the most stylish documentaries.

1. "UNZIPPED" (1995): One of the best and most amusing fashion docs of all time. Directed by Isaac Mizrahi's then boyfriend, Douglas Keeve, it follows the designer as he prepares for his Fall 1994 show, on the heels of crushing reviews of a previous collection. This movie has it all: Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell singing along to Culture Club's "Miss Me Blind," Mizrahi sitting down with the irrepressible Eartha Kitt and her poodles ("It's almost impossible to have any style at all without the right dogs!" he says), Veronica Webb's leg getting stuck in a thigh-high stiletto boot.

2. "HEAVY METAL PARKING LOT" (1986): This documentary short is an ode to the kind of style that binds a subculture together. By shooting tailgaters as they wait to enter a Judas Priest and Dokken double bill, in a Maryland arena, John Heyn and Jeff Krulik present a perfect glossary of eighties hard-rock fashions, from bandannas to teased-up mullets and wispy mustaches. Watching this doc always reminds me that, to borrow the words of one of the hard-partying concertgoers, heavy metal rules!

3. "CRACKED ACTOR" (1975): This BBC production, directed by Alan Yentob, follows David Bowie during part of his "Diamond Dogs" tour, in 1974. We see the singer in Los Angeles, both onstage and off, a wraith done up in slim suits in powder blue and slate gray, his hair a shocking orange-and-gold swoop. A segment in a limo as it makes its way through the California desert, with Bowie, in a wide-brimmed hat, humming along to Aretha Franklin's "Natural Woman," is a highlight.



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
BEST SHOTS

Call it the first wave of the endemic, a bona-fide COVID bump. The statistics may be hard to parse—the United States stopped systematically collecting data on coronavirus cases months ago—but, almost certainly, growing numbers of Americans are coming down with COVID. In recent weeks, Jill Biden went into isolation after testing positive, and John McEnroe missed calling much of the U.S. Open on account of an infection. The virus is increasingly turning up in wastewater, especially in the Northeast, and since late June COVID hospitalizations nationwide have nearly tripled.

In historical terms, though, the rise is more ripple than wave—a viral burst softened by three years of infections and vaccines, and by bodies that remember what they've seen. Despite the increase in cases, COVID hospitalizations still stand at roughly an eighth of their pandemic peak, and coronavirus deaths are a fifth of what they were this time last year. In the spring, the country's excess-death count—a measure of how many Americans are dying relative to past averages—fell to pre-pandemic levels, a sign that the emergency truly is over. That doesn't mean the threat has passed.

The virus keeps evolving—replicating billions of times in millions of people each day—and scientists are tracking the ascent of two Omicron descendants in particular. EG.5, informally known as Eris, has become the dominant variant in the U.S., accounting for more than twenty per cent of infections. Although the variant has outcompeted its rivals and likely driven the recent uptick in infections, it doesn't appear to inflict more punishing illness than previous strains, and treatments such as Paxlovid are effective against it. A second variant, BA.2.86, nicknamed Pirola, has been detected in a handful of states and in at least ten other countries. It carries a barrage of mutations on its spike protein—an "evolutionary jump similar in size" to that of the original Omicron variant, according to one virologist—raising concerns about its potential to evade our defenses. But early evidence suggests that the variant isn't especially transmissible and that our antibodies confer a reasonable level of protection against it.

In all likelihood, then, the current crop of variants won't upend our equilibrium. Still, the unceasing evolution of the virus—and the certain emergence of future pandemic pathogens—warrants ongoing vigilance. Considering the costs of a pandemic, it's hard to imagine that we could overinvest in preparing for new infectious threats, related to this virus or others: in the U.S. alone, COVID's economic toll could reach fourteen trillion dollars by the end of the year—a sum approaching the G.D.P. of China. And yet the public and political will to confront contagion seems to have evaporated and, at times, transmuted into hostility to the very idea that we should do so. More than half the states have recently taken steps to restrict the authority of public-health officials, and opposition to well-established immunization requirements for childhood diseases has surged. The coronavirus has long since lapsed as a primary concern for most Americans, and only seventeen per cent took last year's COVID boosters, including less than half of those over the age of sixty-five. Can we make progress on a problem when so few seem to care?



Last week, the Food and Drug Administration authorized new COVID boosters. They target a version of Omicron that was dominant in June, but they also manage to generate antibodies that neutralize the strains now in circulation. Like prior boosters, they are expected to provide several months of protection against serious illness and may provide a short-lived defense against infection. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that all Americans get boosted, even as some

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

experts argue that the benefits of another shot are uncertain in young and healthy individuals who've already been immunized and infected. (The United Kingdom currently recommends boosters only for older people, those with chronic conditions, and other select groups.) Amid the debate, it's easy to lose sight of a plain truth: for populations at high risk, the shot will save lives.

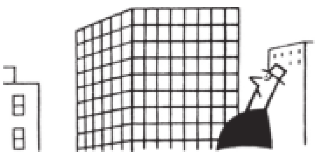
Health officials have started to position COVID boosters not as a novelty—something to be dissected and debated—but as a routine occurrence, akin to the annual flu shot. This is, in effect, an effort to make public health boring again. That may well be the right tack, but it feels insufficient. For one thing, only about half of Americans get the flu vaccine. For another, there's reason to believe we can do better than chase the latest variant with boosters that provide fleeting defense against disease and do little to block transmission. Some scientists are trying to develop vaccines that offer enduring protection not just against the variant du jour but against a range of coronaviruses, or that reduce the chances of contracting the virus by dramatically raising antibody levels in the nose and mouth. It's also possible that future vaccines will be delivered via skin patches and nasal sprays—a palatable alternative to injections for the needle-shy. Project NextGen, a five-billion-dollar Biden Administration initiative modelled on Operation Warp Speed, is intended to accelerate advances in vaccine technology, and last month the program dispatched its first round of funding. But whether and when such vaccines will become available—and how many people will take them—is anyone's guess.

Politics may be the art of the possible, but it is also a practice in prioritization. Central to the challenges of endemic COVID are flagging public interest and, in some corners, revisionist punditry. Meanwhile, because of pandemic fatigue, many Americans are now loath to accept inconvenience, let alone make sacrifices, in order to reduce the risks of infection. We can't give up on education, communication, and persuasion—the essential tools of public health—but, for the time being, spending our limited political and financial capital on biomedical advances may be the surest path forward.

The swift arrival of COVID vaccines saved countless lives during the pandemic—a feat possible only because of the decades of research and development that preceded it. A rapid response to an emergency depends on the investments we make before it arrives; a smooth return to normal life requires sustaining them after it passes.

—Dhruv Khullar

NEW NEIGHBOR DEPT.
MYSTERY BOX



In lower Manhattan, a long-mysterious construction, which emerged slowly amid One World Trade, the Oculus, and the 9/11 Memorial—"the final piece of the puzzle" in the complex, its benefactor Mike Bloomberg said—will open for its first public performance on September 19th. Having revealed itself, the Perelman Performing Arts Center (PAC NYC), designed by Joshua Ramus and his firm, REX, retains an air of mystery: it's a giant marble-sheathed cube, beige and opaque by day and warmly aglow by night, fronted by a two-story staircase that evokes the approach to a Mayan temple or the gangway to an alien spacecraft. What's inside?

Ramus recently met up with PAC NYC's artistic director, Bill Rauch, to show a neighbor around. Ramus, who worked with Rem Koolhaas before starting REX, in 2006, is tall and wiry, with a shaved head; he speaks with wide-eyed calm, waving precise, gesticulating hands, and wore a monochromatic dark-gray sweater and pants. Rauch, a theatre director who ran the Oregon Shakespeare Festival for many years, is gray-haired and smiley; he wore blue pants and a colorful plaid shirt. Trying to connect before the walk-through, Ramus and Rauch passed each other twice on crisscrossing adjacent staircases, as if trapped in an Escher paradox. "Hello again!" Rauch said.

They emerged on the building's "public" level, free to enter and open to all, which the PAC's executive director, Khady Kamara, describes as the neighborhood's "living room." The richly hued lobby, with stylish, comfy sofas and a small stage, and the adjacent, groovy-looking Marcus Samuelsson restaurant were designed by the Rockwell Group. (Samuelsson says he wants the space to say "Hey! Come on in!") The PAC's three theatres, which are maximally transformable, are in the building's center, ringed by a mesmerizing perimeter corridor whose exterior walls gleam like stained glass. "It's a Portuguese marble," Ramus said. "It has a bit of iron oxide in it—that's what makes it turn amber when the light comes through. . . . That quote 'impurity' is an impurity we really, really want." The marble is laminated between plates of glass, "to seal the stone so that it can't attract water or impurities in the air."

REX, which worked in conjunction with Davis Brody Bond and Charcoalblue, won the design competition after an earlier concept by Frank Gehry's firm fell through. It came with challenging parameters. "We thought it was important to do something that was pure, and that recognized the sobriety of the context," Ramus said. "That was where we got the notion of having a pure stone cube." But not just any cube: a glowing one. "We started calling it the mystery box." A building is often said to reveal itself over time, but, Ramus went on, "we want the mystery to be *more mysterious* over time." Wrapping the building in stone was a way of "also amping up the potential once you're inside."

"And surprise," Rauch said. "Surprise and delight." A beeping construction vehicle motored by; shifting sunlight filtered through the walls. "The building is designed around the auditoria, shaped like an L," Ramus said, approaching one.

"I call them theatres, but I love that he calls them auditoria," Rauch said.

Inside one of the auditoria, stagehands were setting up sawhorses and bustling around. "Guys, you need to stand under that balcony or put on hard hats," one called to the visitors. The theatres, Ramus said, "are separated acoustically." He pointed at a space in the floor. "You can do an amplified rock concert in one and spoken word in



Don't miss the season-opening Met premiere of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, starring Joyce DiDonato as the heroic Sister Helen Prejean, the nun determined to save the soul of a murderer on death row, sung by Ryan McKinny. Met Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts Ivo van Hove's riveting production.

Tickets start at $25 metopera.org 212.362.6000

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another. I often say that if you got a big enough helicopter and could cleave the top of the building off, you could fly the three theatres away separately."

The moving parts include a demountable balcony, "guillotine" walls, and a "reconfigurable" floor that is controlled by a sci-fi-looking control room below, but the building also has analog charms, including walnut-veneer panels that evoke a forest. Rauch said, "One of the theatre consultants told us that the first audience was—"

"Who's smoking in the theatre?!" a man in a hard hat yelled, picking up a crushed cigarette butt. "That's so gross!"

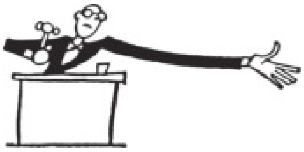
"—a kind of ancient gathering around a campfire to hear a story," Rauch went on. "Intimate, in the round. So this whole technically complex thing is structured around that image, of gathering around a campfire. Isn't that beautiful?"

Ramus and Rauch watched as the crew began to mount the PAC's very first set. Several men and women carried what looked like a small proscenium arch and put it on the sawhorses. "We could do a little puppet show," Rauch said.

The début series, concerts on the theme of refuge, will feature musicians performing and a giant L.E.D. video screen. "All this flexibility is also a metaphor for how we have to change our perspective on one another," Rauch said. "I think that's really deep, actually."

—*Sarah Larson*

THE BENCH
WHAT A MAN



A couple of weeks ago, Scott McAfee, the judge overseeing the election-related racketeering case against Donald Trump and eighteen co-defendants in Georgia, issued a surprising ruling: the trials would be streamed online and broadcast live on television. This was a departure from the criminal proceedings against Trump in New York and Florida. McAfee said the ruling was "in line with the spirit of transparency." Some worried that it could allow Trump to turn the case into a televised spectacle. But the skeptics may be underestimating McAfee. A review of his body of work reveals an entertainer with a knack for surprising his audience.

See, for example, the What-A-Man pageant, for performative young men, held annually in the early two-thousands, at North Cobb High School, in Kennesaw, Georgia. Contestants offered their best pickup lines and revealed other talents. The quarterback usually won. But, in 2007, a self-described "orch dork" took home the honor. That dork? Scott McAfee. Tall and decked out in black, he wore a Stars-and-Stripes-patterned bandanna around his blond hair as he performed Jimi Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" on an electrified cello. His classmates screamed for him to toss his shirt into the crowd.

"I declined," McAfee recently recalled. "I was the lifeguard that always kept his shirt on." He did, however, drop to his knees and put the cello's strings to his mouth.

"There was probably some tonguing there that we would normally associate with a wind instrument," Richard Prior, who conducted the Emory Youth Symphony, in which McAfee played at the time, said. "But he had a masterful control of the material." McAfee went on to enroll at Emory, on a music scholarship. He had no trouble with more traditionally challenging works, like Gustav Holst's suite "The Planets" and Brahms's Double Concerto, which he performed at his senior recital.

Off campus, McAfee made money playing weddings and, once, by filling in for Janelle Monáe's cellist during the recording of her first album. "I was in the basement," he said. "I heard her warming up upstairs." He went on, "The way it was edited, I came out of there sounding like Yo-Yo Ma." Several months later, he bought the CD and eagerly skipped ahead to track sixteen. "They'd cut my two-minute intro," he said. "But I still got a check for five hundred dollars from Atlantic Records." It was the same sum he'd earned doing six nights of Christmas performances at a church when he



"I thought that would be cute for her to fit into for exactly one day of her entire life."


D
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was in eleventh grade. He decided to apply to law school.

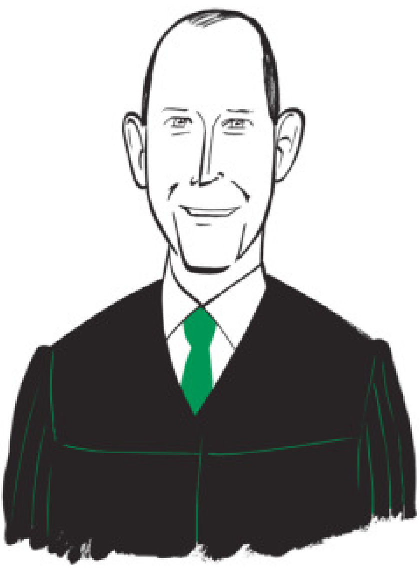
At the University of Georgia, McAfee became a member of the Federalist Society—"a networking opportunity," he said, "not a cabal"—and the treasurer of the Law Republicans. He performed "Smooth Criminal" on cello at his class's talent show. After getting his law degree, he worked as a state prosecutor and a federal prosecutor, and then became the inspector general of Georgia. He gigged less frequently, but he found an audience on Facebook. When the final season of "Game of Thrones" premièred ("What a disappointment," he said of the ending), he posted a video of himself playing the show's theme on banjo—his second-favorite instrument—and cello. He also posted a video in which his goldendoodle appears to be playing "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke," on bass. (McAfee was kneeling behind the dog.) His last public performance was for a Kol Nidre service at a temple in North Atlanta, last fall. "I wore a yarmulke," he said, adding, "I haven't dusted off the cello much since I got this new gig."

Earlier this year, McAfee, who is thirty-four, was appointed to the Superior Court of Fulton County. In August, he was chosen for the Trump case by a random-selection process. The decision to televise the proceedings was in keeping with his typical courtroom rules.

"I have no aspiration to become the next Judge Ito," he said, referring to Lance Ito, the bearded and bespectacled judge who presided over the O. J. Simpson trial, in 1995, as a hundred and fifty million Americans tuned in to watch. "Or the next Judge Judy, for that matter." The Trump trial will surely surpass both Ito's and Judy's ratings. He went on, "The idea with my job, in general, is to keep your head down. Stay even-keeled and manage expectations. This is not What-A-Man North Cobb 2007. It'll be mission accomplished if I personally bore everyone to death during my trials."

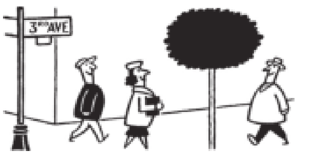
He has a backup plan if the big one goes off the rails under his watch. "I've got my eye on some bagpipes," he said. "You only need to learn like three songs and you can get paid whatever you want for any wedding."

—*Charles Bethea*



Scott McAfee

THE BOARDS
UNAFRAID OF SUCCESS



"Who wants to live in New York?" the three frenemies in Stephen Sondheim's "Merrily We Roll Along" wonder. Happily, Maria Friedman does. Friedman, a British singer and actress, is directing a new version of that musical, soon to open on Broadway. "Here, the elevator man has as much right as you do," she said one day last week, sitting in the café behind the Loeb Boathouse, in Central Park. "Everything is like these quick-witted, fast one-liners." She snapped her fingers to emphasize her point.

It was late on a sultry afternoon. The temperature was past ninety, but Friedman, who had just finished nine hours of rehearsal with Daniel Radcliffe (Charley), Jonathan Groff (Franklin), and Lindsay Mendez (Mary) for the mid-September transfer from New York Theatre Workshop (sold out) to the Hudson Theatre (limited run), felt not the humidity but "the aspiration of man" in the New York air. For her, yes, the noise, yes, the dirt, yes, the heat—whoops, a rat! Friedman lifted her feet up and gamely went on with her story.

Her first visit to Manhattan was as a twenty-three-year-old, in 1983. A boyfriend who had a gig as a dancer with Shirley Bassey in the Bahamas sent her a cheap ticket with a stopover in the city. She asked a cop how to get to the Park. "Take a left, a left, then another left," she recounted. She acted out the joke, doing a New York's Finest accent.

Her favorite part of Central Park is the Lake. She has rowed there no fewer than twenty-five times, by her count. But, alas, the rehearsal had gone so long that she'd missed her chance on this day. The boats were all locked up, leaving the water to darkness and to—whoops, another rat!

This prompted a good show-biz story: Friedman was having dinner in the West End one night. A friend excused himself to use the bathroom and came back to find her standing on a chair. She recalled, "He asked, 'Are you singing "Happy Birthday"?' And I was, like, 'Maria Friedman is going to stand up and sing because it's somebody's birthday? Are you *kidding* me? Get me out of here!'" She'd seen a mouse.

"Merrily" is Friedman's first Sondheim directing credit, but her singing epaulets are well sewn on. She originated the role of Dot in the London production of "Sunday in the Park with George" (Olivier nomination, 1991), did the same six years later with Fosca, in "Passion" (won!), and sang the jealous Mary in "Merrily" along the way. Directing the play made her shift her sympathies to Franklin. Of all the "Merrily"s over the years, Friedman's is probably the nicest to the character, who is usually portrayed as the kind of spineless wretch that Alan Alda plays. "Here's the question," she demanded. "What is wrong with success? Why *wouldn't* you want it? Do you *want* to sit in a garage? They call it selling out. I call it success."

Friedman and Sondheim, who died in 2021, were old, old friends. When did they meet? Friedman doesn't do dates. "I'm literally the most present person," she said. "I'm useless. Days go by and I'm in them, whatever." She first got to know the composer-lyricist when she played Dot in "Sunday."

A connection blossomed. Sondheim looked out for her. "I got ill once," Friedman recalls, "and I said, 'Look, who knows what's going to go on?'" What do you say, old friend? Sondheim agreed to be godparent to one of her children. Friedman even has a rare I-stood-up-Sondheim-and-lived-to-tell-the-tale story, which took place on the very same Lake she was sitting by. She was rowing with an elderly friend, lost track of time, and couldn't find a cab in the Park. Sond-



Maria Friedman

heim loved her and forgave. But what year? "So find out the year Marvin died," Friedman said. She was in town to sing at his memorial. (Hamlisch, 1944-2012.)

"Merrily" on Broadway, she added, is the N.Y.T.W. "Merrily" plus "a notebook this full of notes"—fingers spread—that she and the cast never got to address earlier. And a bigger budget. When Franklin walks up the gangplank to sail to Europe, the stairs come out now. "The beat was missing before," Friedman said. "Now I have the show I wanted to do." Her next hope isn't to direct another Sondheim but to sing him again. She has her eye on Mrs. Lovett, in "Sweeney Todd." She worries that she is going to be too old—Annaleigh Ashford, almost twenty-five years younger than she, is baking the meat pies now on Broadway. But this is New York. "I have a very good Mrs. Lovett in me," she declared, with moxie.

—*D. T. Max*

AT BAT
SEAMHEADS



On a Saturday afternoon in August, while the Red Sox were trouncing the Yankees in the Bronx on the way to a series sweep, members of the Baseball Project, a supergroup that sings about baseball, were settling into the greenroom of the Sinclair, a small venue in Cambridge, Massachusetts, not too far from Fenway Park. The night before, they'd performed in Brooklyn—Yankees territory, more or less. "They were yelling for 'The Yankee Flipper,'" Scott McCaughey, one of the band's guitarists and singers, said. He was referring to a ballad he wrote about the time Jack (Black Jack) McDowell, the former Yankees ace, got drunk with members of R.E.M.—including McCaughey and one of his Baseball Project bandmates, Mike Mills. "Sorry," McCaughey joked in the greenroom. "We don't know how to play that anymore." McCaughey is a Giants fan. "You get sick of hearing the Yankees doing so great all the time," he said.

"You don't have to worry anymore," Linda Pitmon, a Yankees fan and the band's drummer, said.

The Baseball Project also includes another former member of R.E.M., Peter Buck, along with Steve Wynn, the singer and guitarist who leads the Dream Syndicate. The group was born at a party the night before R.E.M. was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, in 2007. Wynn recalled that he and Pitmon, who are married, met McCaughey there, and they started talking about their shared baseball obsession.

"I'd met you before," McCaughey interrupted.

"In the men's room in a Seattle club," Wynn clarified.

"Scott and I, each unbeknownst to the other, had the idea of someday writing a few songs or an entire album about baseball," Wynn continued. They began to discuss it, and within a week they'd swapped several songs. A few months later, they had a whole album, "Volume One: Frozen Ropes and Dying Quails." That was fifteen years ago. In the meantime, R.E.M. broke up.

The Baseball Project has just come out with its fourth album, "Grand Salami Time!," produced by R.E.M.'s old producer Mitch Easter and recorded at his compound in North Carolina. They play mostly on small stages, although they often throw out the first pitch or sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before ballgames. When the group had a night off in Boston a few years ago, Josh Kantor, the organist at Fenway, who has toured with the band, took them behind the scenes of the Red Sox' ancient bandbox. Pitmon rolled around in the warning-track dirt in front of the Green Monster.

"I was, like, 'Oh, man, what's it like to play at, you know, an eighty-thousand-seat football stadium?'" Kantor recalled asking Mills. "He's, like, 'What's it like to play at the World Series?' And I was, like, 'Oh, right. That actually is really cool.'"

Mills once invited Kantor to join their fantasy team—they play in a league with other indie musicians, including Stephen Malkmus, from Pavement, and Ira Kaplan, of Yo La Tengo—but warned him that he would have to take it seriously. Kantor knew that Mills meant it, and declined.

McCaughey usually wins the league, though every member of the band is competitive—except for Buck. "I'll be in the van back there, and it's like fantasy whatever—"

"Fantasy baseball," McCaughey said.

" 'Oh, this guy has a *groin pull*,'" Buck went on.

Buck doesn't follow sports. "He's our token non-baseball man," Wynn said.

"I like all these people and I like the songs," Buck explained. He does appreciate what he calls baseball's "old characters": "They were like Wild West gunfighters. They were weird, you know, in a way that's now impossible." He went on, "They were like rockabilly stars or rhythm-and-blues stars, except that they were wearing a uniform and hitting a little ball."

These days, the money is bigger and any weirdness is under wraps. The band doesn't shy away from the game as it is now—there's a song about Shohei Ohtani, and a sly take on doctored balls ("Just like Brylcreem, a little dab will do ya / I use that L.A. look to try and fool ya")—but it can be a struggle to come up with material. "A lot of the current players are kind of boring," McCaughey said. "They don't drink and carouse like they used to. I mean, probably for a good reason."

The big themes persist, in baseball and in music. Wynn was on a solo tour, staying in a run-down hotel outside Buffalo, when Buck sent him the music for the song "Journeyman."

"It was great music," Wynn said. "I went, Yeah. A guy goes town to town, just does the best he can, and does something pretty well so he can keep working. And I can write a song like that."

—*Louisa Thomas*



BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

DESIGNING THE APOCALYPSE

A young architect faces the climate crisis.

BY SAM KNIGHT

At the end of his first year at the architecture school of the Royal Danish Academy, Pavels Hedström went on a class trip to Japan. Hedström, a twenty-five-year-old undergraduate, revered Japanese culture and aesthetics, even though he had never visited the country. As a teen-ager growing up in rural Sweden, Hedström had been introduced to Zen meditation by his mother, Daina, and devoured manga and anime. In architecture school, Hedström was drawn to Japanese principles of design and how they applied to a world—and a profession—increasingly troubled by the climate crisis. Hedström was particularly influenced by Metabolism, a postwar Japanese architectural movement that imagined cities of the future as natural organisms: ephemeral, self-regulating, and subject to biological rhythms of growth, death, and decay. In 1977, Kisho Kurokawa, one of Metabolism's founders, wrote, "Human society must be regarded as one part of a continuous natural entity that includes all animals and plants."

It was the summer of 2016. In Tokyo, Hedström and his classmates visited Kurokawa's Nakagin Capsule Tower, from 1972, which was one of the few Metabolist structures to be built. It consisted of modernist, detachable, cube-shaped modules, each prefabricated according to the dimensions of a traditional Japanese tearoom. But the Metabolist future never quite arrived. (The tower fell into disrepair and was dismantled in 2022.)

The class then travelled to the small island of Naoshima, to visit the Chichu Art Museum, a mostly subterranean concrete structure designed by Tadao Ando. The museum is dedicated to the work of three artists—Claude Monet, James Turrell, and Walter De Maria—and lets in light through geometric openings in the earth above. Hedström experienced the building as a revelation: a sequence of almost religious encounters with concrete, sky, land, and sea. "It felt like I came to the end stop of architecture," he told me recently. The museum was astonishing. Hedström loved being there. And yet he didn't feel good at all. "My mind was bent," he later wrote.

Part of Hedström's reaction stemmed from the familiar, dismaying sensation that many young artists feel upon encountering an outrageous masterpiece: Who am I trying to kid, anyway? But there was also an unease that felt particular to his generation. Hedström wanted to build a better world. At the same time, architecture was deeply implicated in what was wrong about the world. Around a third of global carbon emissions come from the construction industry and from the energy used to heat, cool, and operate buildings. Humanity is paving and enclosing the earth at an unthinkable rate. According to the International Energy Agency, an estimated 2.6 trillion square feet of new floor area will be added to global building stock between 2020 and 2060—that's the equivalent of throwing up a New York City every month. In the brutalist beauty of the Chichu Art Museum, Hedström experienced a combination of creative and political futility. "I was somehow overwhelmed," he recalled. "It just took my breath away, like, literally. And I got, like, starting to feel ill."

Back home, Hedström began to suffer panic attacks. He was an avid climber, and enjoyed martial arts and calisthenics. But his body deserted him. "It was a new kind of emptiness that I never felt before," Hedström said. "I didn't think that I was going mad but I felt that I was going under. It was like the end of my abilities." He moved back to Sweden, to live with his brother, Kaspars, a musician in Malmö. Hedström spent most of his time drawing and lis-

Pavels Hedström in the Inxect Suit, which is shared with a colony of mealworms.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOBIAS NICOLAI

tening to music. When he tried to meditate, his ears filled with tinnitus. "I was really afraid of silence," he said.

Hedström now ascribes his illness, which lasted slightly more than a year, to a sense of anxiety about the future of the planet—and to the delusion that he might be able to save it. "Does the world want to be saved?" Hedström asked me once. "You know, it's a huge question." When he returned to architecture school, he changed his approach to design, starting with a search for balance in his own body and, later, for devices that might help humans to live more intimately, and equitably, with other species. He channelled his dread into ideas that existed somewhere between solutions and warnings for the future. "It is very, very close to something that is connected to fear and to, you know, apocalypse," he told me.

Hedström's work is at once disturbing and alluring. He calls his process "working with playfulness around really scary shit." He summons the action figures of his childhood—implausible machines—and casts them into a future of ecological and social distress. "It's about actually reprogramming our minds with how we connect with nature," he said. "I guess that's what I want to achieve." Hedström thinks of most architecture as "a membrane designed to protect and separate us from the rest of nature." His intention is the opposite: he wants nonhuman life to be so close as to be inescapable. One of his devices is a hooded PVC suit and face mask—based on the gear worn to clean oil rigs—that a person shares with a colony of mealworms. The warmth and humidity inside the suit nurture the worms, which can digest certain forms of plastic, and can then be consumed, in turn, as a source of human sustenance. "Like shrimp popcorn," Hedström says. "Really nice."

Another of Hedström's prototypes, the Fog-X, is a thigh-length outdoor jacket that can be converted into a shelter and repurposed, with the aid of lightweight poles, into a sail-like apparatus that collects drinking water from the air. An app provides real-time data to track fog and clouds. In February, the Fog-X won the global Lexus Design Award for young designers, beating more than two thousand entries. "Pavels is kind of like this very romantic, 'Dune'-like character in how he and also his work presents," Sumayya Vally, a South African architect who designed the 2021 Serpentine Pavilion and has mentored Hedström, told me. "It's dystopian, but also very, very real."

Paola Antonelli, the senior curator in the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Architecture and Design, was on the jury of the Lexus award. She situated Hedström's work in a tradition of speculative and radical architecture that began in the nineteen-sixties. Groups such as Archigram, in London, and Archizoom, in Florence, imagined walking cities and plug-in cities and "No-Stop City," a city freed from architecture itself. They plumbed the future in order to confound the present. "Gorgeous artifacts—so a great formal elegance—that attract the eye in order to then capture the mind," Antonelli said. "Pavels, just out of school, is kind of the son of all these designers."

The urgency of the climate crisis makes Hedström uncomfortable with the idea of doing speculative or abstract work. "You can easily put it aside," he said. "I want to bridge speculative design with something that would actually be a suggestion. For me, it's really important that everything I draw should also work." One afternoon in June, I flew to Copenhagen, where Hedström lives with his wife, Mai Sakamoto, a Danish Japanese fashion designer, who also studied at the Royal Danish Academy, and their baby daughter, Komo.

Hedström has a tendency to get lost in his thoughts. We had agreed to meet at the Nørreport metro station, but there was no sign of Hedström, and he wasn't answering his phone. I stood in the sunshine. The city was like an advertisement for European civilization. Danish families rode past on cargo bikes. Tourists were getting drunk on pleasure boats. But it was unusually hot. It hadn't rained for almost three weeks. The national drought index was at 9.7 out of 10. I started walking in the direction of Hedström's apartment. When we met in the street, about half an hour later, Hedström was aglow with a faint sweat. He had recently shaved his shoulder-length hair to a buzz cut. He was wearing a blue tank top, black shorts, black boots, and a blue bucket hat. In order to find me, he had borrowed an enormous bicycle, which was the size of a pony.

In the nineties, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, researchers at the Royal College of Art, in London, used the term "critical design" to describe a field that seeks to challenge, rather than affirm, the way we live now. Dunne and Raby, who now run the Designed Realities Lab, at the New School, in New York, have observed that radical design largely fell into abeyance after its heyday, in the seventies, with the triumph of market capitalism. "Reality instantly shrank, becoming one dimensional," they have written. "There were no longer other social or political possibilities beyond capitalism for design to align itself with."

However, the financial crisis of 2008, the ensuing decade of political instability, and the quickening, visceral damage of climate change have energized the field again. Moving away from the techno-utopian cityscapes of the past, practices such as Forensic Architecture, in London, Lateral Office, in Toronto, and Formafantasma, which is based in Milan and Rotterdam, use the methods and principles of design to reconsider everything from war crimes to timber supply chains and future urban planning in the Arctic. In a 2018 essay about teaching young designers, Dunne quoted Ursula K. Le Guin, the science-fiction writer, to express his hope that they might be "realists of a larger reality," rather than simply problem solvers for a Western model of capitalist consumption. "What if design education's focus on 'making stuff real' perpetuates everything that is wrong with current reality?" he asked.

Hedström had invited me to see "Worms of Mass Consumption," an installation featuring his mealworm device, which he calls the Inxect Suit. The show was at a small community theatre in Sydhavn, not far from the city center. In a darkened space, three metal trays of mealworms hung from the ceiling. The worms were bathed in pink light, which turned on and off, and were feasting on Styrofoam that Hedström and his collaborators had finagled from a local recycling plant. The smell—overwhelming and ammoniac—was appalling. "It's a big conflict at the start," Hedström said.

Hedström has proposed factory-like



"Shall I refill your water glasses so that they're full when you leave?"

• •

systems that would feed plastic waste to mealworms on an industrial scale, but he grapples with the ethical and practical problems in doing so. (It takes a colony of three to four thousand mealworms a week to digest a coffee cup.) "It's very capitalistic or, like, it's a very human way of thinking," Hedström said. It doesn't feel like symbiosis if one of you is being farmed. Mealworms are the larvae of *Tenebrio molitor*, a species of darkling beetle, which is sensitive to light. As part of the exhibition, Hedström and his collaborators had attempted to use lighting to direct the worms to consume the Styrofoam in certain patterns. But it wasn't working very well. Hedström contemplated one of the trays of heaving, quietly popping creatures. "Is it a method," he wondered, "or is it torture?"

Since 2014, the Royal Danish Academy has offered a master's program called Architecture and Extreme Environments. The course was founded by David Garcia, a slender, charismatic professor who worked at the studio of the British architect Norman Foster, in London, and was a partner at Henning Larsen, a well-known Danish firm, before moving into academia to agitate for architecture that meets the demands of the climate crisis. "The work that we create here is trying to cry out," Garcia told me. "These things cannot just be put on the back burner anymore."

When I met Garcia at the architecture school, which occupies a former naval building on the Copenhagen waterfront, the students had gone home for the summer. The Architecture and Extreme Environments studio was a promising mess of construction boots, rolled-up plans, and unusual contraptions stacked on open metal shelves. Each year, Garcia takes a group of about thirty students to spend a month in a location facing some form of ecological stress. In 2015, it was the Amazon; last year, it was Jakarta. The students spend months researching the site before building and testing a product—a flood barrier, a water-filtration system—and then proposing a related, climate-conscious building.

The increasing frequency of heat waves, wildfires, and severe flooding in Europe has altered Garcia's sense of what they are preparing for. "The narrative of extremes has absolutely changed, only in the span of nine years. In the very beginning, it sounded like a very sensationalist title, something that happened far away," Garcia said. "Now it's become almost a generic understanding of many of the conditions we're experiencing."

Garcia cultivates an intense atmosphere in the course. Lotta E. Locklund, a recent graduate, described it to me as "a little bit of a studio flying on its own." Locklund studied at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, or SCI-Arc, in Los Angeles, before returning to Europe to complete her studies. "I think people that are drawn to the program are people that are critical of the current state of the built environment in the first place," she said. "I think our generation of designers carries that very heavily."

Plenty of Garcia's graduates go on to work in public policy or for N.G.O.s. But between a third and half are hired by mainstream architecture firms. Garcia acknowledged that it was not always an easy transition. "Given how much pressure practices are under today, they just want graduates that can draw CAD and BIM," Garcia said, referring to design software programs. "Very few practices, in reality, are looking for critical thinking and a critical voice that will make them grow with the times, with the urgencies of the moment. They think of that as a disruption."

In 2022, Locklund joined Herzog & de Meuron, a celebrated Swiss practice—a decision that she is still, to some extent, wrestling with. "There is a huge identity crisis in coming out of a program such as this one," she said. "You're so driven to think for yourself and then you have to conform in an industry that doesn't necessarily encourage that."

H&dM employs five hundred and fifty people in offices from Hong Kong to San Francisco. In theory, Locklund explained, working at a major firm should give her the opportunity to influence the building industry for the better. In reality, it was difficult to challenge the preoccupations—aesthetic, political, or otherwise—of any firm's founders. "I don't see any chance of affecting that," she said. "And it's also not my

place." Locklund was grateful for a job and the imprimatur of H&dM on her résumé, but she wasn't sure of her long-term plans. "It's not about individual firms," she said. "It's more about: What is an architect's role? Where do I fit into this architectural machine or this building-industry machine that is going on?"

Hedström met Garcia within a few days of arriving at the architecture school, as an undergraduate, in the fall of 2015. "He just wanted to go to this program from the very beginning," Garcia said. Hedström had spent the previous three years in art schools in Sweden, moving from painting to increasingly elaborate wooden sculptures. "I started to build things," he said. "And they got bigger and bigger." In Copenhagen, Hedström had a profound sense of meeting his vocation. In high school, he had wanted to be a diplomat and to address climate change through international politics. In architecture, potential solutions felt closer to hand. "It's so banal, but I really had an idea of being part of saving the world," Hedström said. "There was a tool set for it."

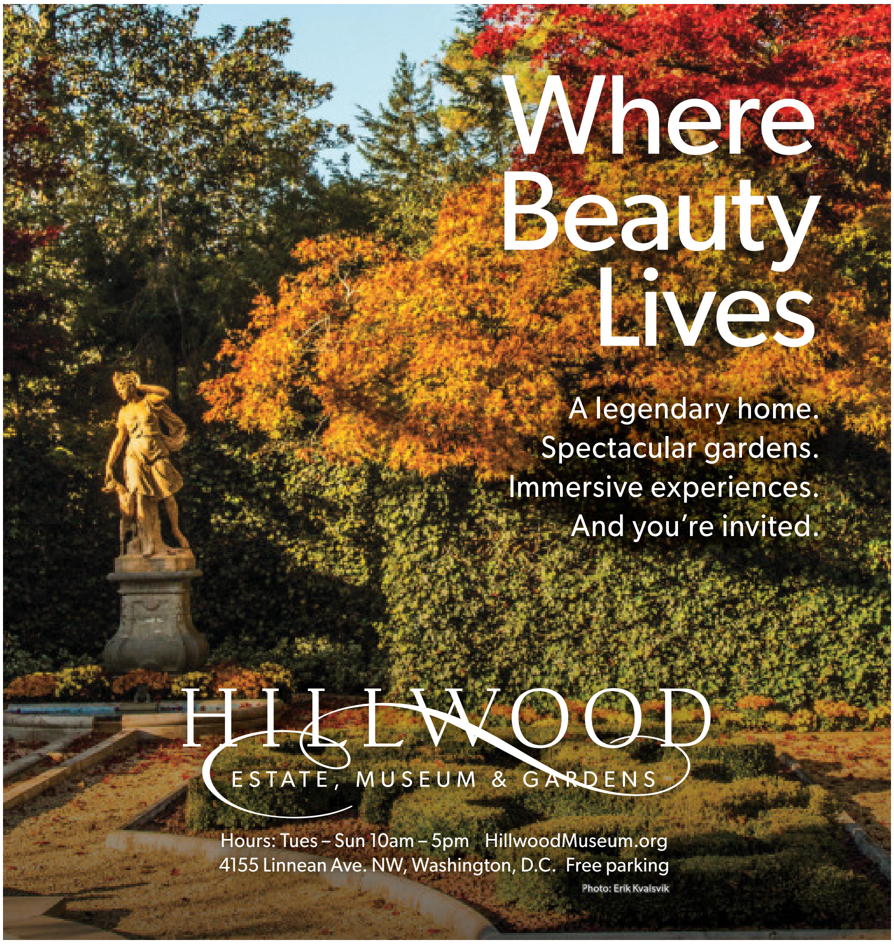
Before he fell ill, Hedström's schoolwork had a momentous, unboundaried feel. For one early assignment, students had to make a technical 2-D drawing of an everyday object, like a pair of scissors. Hedström devised a five-minute animation of plastic bottles, arrayed infinitely inside one another, like a Mandelbrot set. For another project, students were asked to design a building where people could come together. Many of Hedström's classmates designed cafés, or museums. Hedström proposed a combination of prison and monastery, where monks who had chosen to withdraw from society could coexist with inmates, who had been excluded from society. The complex took the shape of a huge twig and it sat on top of a residential apartment block. "The prison was extremely provocative," Markus Oxelman, a fellow-student, recalled. It got Hedström's classmates and professors talking. "Not like in a typical top-student way," Oxelman said. "But kind of a weird genius, who is doing something that's completely out of line, but it works."

During Hedström's first year in Garcia's program, the class travelled to the Atacama Desert, in Chile, which is the driest place on Earth. Hedström was fascinated by the camanchaca, clouds that roll in from the Pacific and form a dense fog that yields no rain. It is thought that the Incas harvested water from trees and cacti that were able to condense the fog, and, since the fifties, there have been experiments in Chile involving fine nylon meshes to extract drinking water from the clouds. Hedström was inspired by the Namib Desert beetle, which catches fog on its abdomen, to see if a human could be empowered with similar technology. "He was very interested in this idea of autonomy," Garcia said.

The first Fog-X prototype was a backpack that included a plexiglass dome. The dome would store water and, when the backpack unfolded, serve as a window for a small tent. "You would be able to see how much life you would have left, in terms of water," Hedström said. In the Extreme Environments course, students make their prototypes for a few hundred dollars and see how they fare in the real world. "We don't care if these experiments work or don't work," Garcia said. "It's always accumulated knowledge."

Hedström's first device had fiddly aluminum poles, which buckled in the Atacama winds. He hadn't thought enough about the soil, or about how the fog-catching net could be tethered. "Parts were bent and things were cracking," Hedström said. He was afraid of scorpions. The camanchaca was always in the distance, cresting another mountain. When he finally managed to deploy the Fog-X in promising conditions, it collected only a few millilitres of water. (A later prototype, which he tested this spring, worked better.)

Hedström was drawn to gathering water in the Atacama in part for political reasons. Chile's water system was privatized during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet—one of a series of extreme economic experiments that fostered corruption and gouged ordinary consumers. Shortly before Garcia's class arrived in Chile, in the fall of 2019, widespread protests erupted across the country, in response to social inequality and the



rising cost of living. Hedström stayed in the mining city of Antofagasta. He watched buses of military police heading toward burning barricades. He found the reality of social unrest and being in a water-starved environment much less stressful than the idea of those things.

It was energizing, in fact. One day in the Atacama, Hedström was chasing the camanchaca with another student when their car, a two-wheel-drive pickup, got stuck in the sand. They had finished their drinking water and were out of cell-phone range. "I really remember when I started to dig under the tires," Hedström recalled, "that this is how I would like it to be when I work as an architect."

Hedström is the youngest of four siblings. He grew up outside the village of Stora Mellösa, in central Sweden, in a collection of Falu-red barns known locally as Castellet, or the Little Castle. Hedström's parents were artists and teachers. Castellet was a dilapidated former community arts venue that his father, Bo, dreamed of restoring. Hedström's childhood was free-roaming and frugal. He played in the woods a lot. "We didn't have that much money," he said. "At the end of the month, we were searching the sofas for coins, so I could get some candy and my father could get cigarettes."

Castellet was in a permanent state of renovation. Bo was always at the table with a coffee and some new plans. "My mother got mad," Hedström recalled. "You could come home and not know the way to the toilet." (His parents separated in 2005.) Bo eventually restored Castellet's event spaces for music and spoken-word performances. Hedström went to a Waldorf school, an experience that he disliked but which nonetheless shaped his understanding of the world. When he played, he liked to pretend that he was a businessman. He dreamed of a carport and of cycling on asphalt roads.



One morning in April, 2020, during the onset of the pandemic, Hedström felt an urge to call his father. They had a close relationship but rarely spoke on the phone. When Bo picked up, his voice sounded off. He had passed out that morning and was waiting for an ambulance. "I really feel that life is leaving me," he told Hedström. Tests showed that Bo, who was sixty-five, had cancer that had spread to his brain, lungs, and stomach. He was given three months to live. On his first night in the hospital, Bo sketched a plan of a new building that he would like to die in.

Hedström spoke to his uncle Björn, Bo's brother, who is an engineer, and decided to move home to build the structure. "The project was really about a vessel of life and death," he said. Hedström took over his father's studio. In the mornings, he continued his architecture studies, and in the afternoons and evenings he and Björn worked on the new, single-story building, a short distance away, in the garden. "I almost had the title 'architect,'" Hedström said. "I got the respect in the family."

The project was called Vänd mot Norr, or Facing North. (Bo was from northern Sweden.) The design incorporated a small pier, which reminded Bo of one that he fished from as a child. The building itself was simple and small—a little more than five hundred square feet—with a living space, a kitchen, and a bathroom, all made from wood and glass. The outside was black, with a long pent roof, and inside the timber was bare and unpainted. Hedström felt like he was realizing an image in his father's mind, while engaging with the essential questions of architecture—making a space for human life and death—for the first time. The building's northerly aspect meant that sunlight would not hit the windows and there would be no reflections. "It's the most transparent way of getting in touch with nature," Hedström said.

Hedström and his family had a budget of around nine thousand dollars. They called in friends and favors. The yard was filled with music while they worked. The gatherings reminded Hedström of his childhood. "The most beautiful part was the social aspect," he said. Bo rested in a virtually inaccessible bedroom in Castellet, at the end of a narrow corridor. In the evenings, he would emerge to eat supper, sit, and talk. Jacob Schill, a friend of Hedström's, came and helped out for a week. "I don't think blissful is the right word, but it was a very idyllic Swedish summer," he said. "And his dad lies in this room, and he could open the window and see out to the building." Schill compared the construction to a Viking ritual: "You go with your boat. He went with his house."

When Hedström, Kaspars, and two friends carried Bo out from his room, on a stretcher, a herd of cows started lowing in a field. Hedström slept with his father on his first night in the new building. Bo said that it was his best sleep since he had fallen ill. The rest of the family brought in mattresses, so they could be together, and lit a huge fire outside the windows which burned through the short August night. "Then he started to cross," Hedström said. Bo died two days later. "It was used for one day of life and two days of transition," Hedström said, of the new building. "And it was extremely satisfying."

At the time, Hedström's elder sister, Marta, was pregnant with her first child. Facing North enabled his family to convene and to act, to combine grief with purpose, death with making. Previously, Hedström had been occupied with architecture's power to recast the environment. Now he learned its social force as well. "It just changed my mind in terms of what architecture can do," Hedström said. He made his father's coffin from wood left over from the house. Once Bo was cremated, Kaspars made an urn for the ashes from the same material.

The Inxect Suit was the prototype for Hedström's thesis project. Garcia's class could not go abroad during the winter of 2021, because of the pandemic, but they were allowed to travel within the Kingdom of Denmark, which includes the Faroe Islands, a windswept archipelago in the North Atlantic, midway between Norway and Iceland. To make the assignment more extreme, Garcia set his class the challenge of designing for the islands in the year 2100. Fish products make up ninety-five per cent of Faroese exports. By 2050, according to the World Economic Forum, there will be more plastic than fish, by weight, in the oceans. Hedström imagined a new economy for the islands,



"If you listen closely, you'll hear two males talking about everything but their feelings."

• •

built around the rearing of insects—a low-carbon form of protein—and the decomposition of plastic waste.

Hedström stayed in a house on Streymoy, the largest of the Faroes, and explored the capital, Tórshavn, in his orange, hooded mealworm suit. A badge on his right arm read "Inxects Mission 1. Plastic Proteins." The temperature, humidity, and CO_2 levels inside the suit were shown on electronic displays mounted on the chest. The worms crawled about, chewing on blocks of polystyrene in a transparent chamber on Hedström's torso. People were unsure how to react. That December, the Faroe Islands were undergoing their fourth wave of coronavirus infections. (During the pandemic, equipment used to screen salmon farms for viruses was repurposed to test for COVID.) "And there was this hazmat guy walking around, and cables connected," he said. "I think they were trying to figure out whether to be afraid."

When Hedström received his first consignment of mealworms in the mail, he was disgusted and somewhat afraid. But he forced his hand into the worms and left it there, until he felt comfortable. When he was testing the suit on Streymoy, he concluded that the worms didn't like steep hills, which made them tumble about. In order to keep them warm, and less jostled, Hedström developed a sequence of movements from Tai Chi. "This idea of having another species that directs you, your behavior and your movement—that really impressed me," he said. One day, Hedström performed Tai Chi for the worms on a set of forbidding cliffs, while Garcia filmed him with a drone. At the end of a month in the Faroes, Hedström starved his mealworms—to expel any plastic from their digestive systems—before freezing them, boiling them, and then frying them for tacos that he served to Garcia and the rest of the class. "It was part of the commitment," he said. "I was quite excited when I was eating them."

For his final presentation at architecture school, Hedström proposed Inxect Island, an apartment complex built around mealworm farming, sustained by ocean-borne plastic, on a decommissioned oil rig moored outside Tórshavn. It was a vision, for 2100, of circular, low-carbon living, fuelled by the polluted sea. Hedström's design took the form of a rising spiral of modular living units, bamboo "photosynthesis parks," and "protein/bioplastic production" zones, with an outdoor meditation space. The structure resembled a mechanical tree, and was hung with fourteen escape ramps, for lifeboats.

One of Hedström's external assessors was Søren Øllgaard, a partner at Henning Larsen, which was founded by one of Denmark's leading twentieth-century architects, in 1959. (Larsen, who was known as the Master of Light, died in 2013.) The machine-like aesthetic of Hedström's project made Øllgaard think immediately of Archigram and other, earlier forms of radical design. "I was amazed by his work. I was amazed when he came in," he recalled. Øllgaard described Hedström to me as a "Viking in a spacesuit." "It's kind of a metamorphosis of conception and person and project," he said. "Everything is one big idea, one big cloud of urgency."

Øllgaard offered Hedström a job. Henning Larsen has seven hundred and fifty staff members, and offices in Hong Kong, New York, and Berlin. Øllgaard hoped that Hedström could infuse the practice with some of his terror—and creativity—for the future. "I think we do too little utopian projects," Øllgaard told me. "Part of us should talk about, not necessarily the next thing that we need to build, but what is *right* to build."

Hedström hesitated before accepting. In Denmark, Henning Larsen was known for its long association with the country's leading industrialist families and for exporting Danish modernist design to all corners of the world. (One of Larsen's best-known buildings is the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Riyadh.) In 2019, the firm became part of the Ramboll Group, a global engineering consultancy, where it accounts for five per cent of annual revenues of two billion dollars. Hedström wasn't sure how his ideas would fit in with a corporate environment. "I was so critical," he told me. "I'm really disturbed by the reality of the business."

On his first day in the office, Hedström wore orange pants and a green

snake amulet, designed by Sakamoto. "I think it was really important for me to make a stand in terms of 'I'm not buying into the identity. I'm here to contribute and learn,'" he said. A few hours later, he was assigned to work on a conventional apartment-and-office block in downtown Stockholm. "I get the pitch for the project," Hedström said, "and I started to watch on my time." According to Hedström, he was later put on a team for a proposed forty-story tower in the business district of Brisbane, Australia, with the working title Meanjin, the Indigenous Turrbal name for the promontory on which much of the city is built. The façade had a cascade of plants and greenery, to evoke a rain forest. Hedström felt that no one on the team engaged meaningfully with the ecological or social dimensions of the site. His own skyscraper sketches weren't convincing at all. "We never talked to any Indigenous people, and this really upset me," he said. "You know, we were in the heart of capitalism." (A spokesperson for Henning Larsen said that the firm was working with creative consultants, including Blaklash, an Aboriginal design agency, to engage with the traditional custodians of the land.)

Every Henning Larsen project met sincere and exacting environmental standards. This was Denmark, after all. But that wasn't bold enough for Hedström or, in his view, for our ecological moment. "We were building for, like, business as usual. And I think that was the main problem," Hedström said. "Because, you know, the challenge that we are standing in front of, it's so urgent and it's so alarming." Hedström describes his time in "the sticky business of architecture" as his most valuable learning experience in the field, after the death of his father. He remains close to Øllgaard. But, stuck in front of a computer screen, he came to fear for his imagination. "People working crazy hours and breaking their backs, I got to experience the bodily, the physical experience of working that way. And that also got me really skeptical," he said. "I became a pretty bad architect, actually."

Hedström lost his job last December. Sakamoto was five months pregnant. When I caught up with Øllgaard, he had just finished breakfast at his summer house, outside Copenhagen. He acknowledged that there was a gap between the sustainability goals of firms like Henning Larsen and what ends up getting built. "The younger generation, they get extremely frustrated that we have this kind of high-end strategy but we are not doing it," Øllgaard said. "The problem is that, if we should follow it completely, we should stop seventy per cent of all our projects. . . . But, I mean, they kind of don't care. And that's, of course, the force of the young generation. They have got the courage for not caring."

Yet Øllgaard was thinking more and more about the buildings he actually wanted to see in the world. "I've been working more than thirty years and I'm also a little sick of doing the wrong thing," he said. "If I should continue working, I'm not going to do, like, fifty thousand square metres of concrete building in Paris with aluminum and steel." He paused. "It's coming to an end."

The Danish summer was extreme this year. For a month, it barely rained. The national drought index reached 10. Fields turned yellow and midsummer bonfires were scaled down, or cancelled. Then it rained. It was the wettest July since records began, in 1874, as floods and storms swept the Baltic. I was walking with Hedström through Copenhagen on the day the weather turned. The air above the city became bruised and heavy. We took shelter from the deluge under a café awning. Hedström was telling me the story of his illness and his recovery, and about his daily meditation. "It's really hard. . . . It brings the thoughts up, that you then can deal with," he said. "It's the opposite of being enlightened—it's being confronted."

Since the birth of Komo, this spring, Hedström has felt torn between conflicting priorities: supporting his young family and helping design a future worth living in for a child born in 2023. "It goes from day to day," he said. "Sometimes I'm getting a bit stressed." When Hedström received the Lexus Design Award, in April, at Milan Design Week, he used his ten-minute audience with Antonelli, the design curator at MOMA, to ask her advice on how to make a living. "What Pavels has gone through is very understandable," Antonelli told me. "There is going to be a learning curve for the world to understand what to make of these designers. They are extremely important, really fundamental, but they don't yet have a slot in the organigram of companies, of institutions, and governments."

Hedström is planning to open his own studio, and has been talking to companies in Japan about consultancy work, and to researchers in Chile about developing the Fog-X project. Last month, he visited the port of Cromarty Firth, in northern Scotland, for a tour of decommissioned oil rigs. Vally, the South African architect who has mentored Hedström, is a year younger than he. She grew up in Johannesburg, where she founded her own practice, Counterspace, to explore African and Islamic forms of design. "With me, or someone like Pavels . . . the ideas are important, and people believe in them, but they don't know what to do with you," Vally said. "We know deeply that we need systemic change, but we have to make it ourselves."

The next morning, Hedström planned to show me the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, in Humlebæk, about twenty miles north of Copenhagen. Unfortunately, we caught a train to Holbæk instead, which is about fifty miles in the wrong direction. On our way back, he told me about his next idea, which was to connect the Inxect Suit and the Fog-X jacket to four more prototype devices—supplying health care, energy, shelter, and education—to fashion a utopian collective that he is calling Village 1. Hedström explained that he wanted to go beyond the individual to investigate the social dynamics of a climate-damaged world.

"This is the next exploration," Hedström said. "It's dismantling the complexity of a civilization or a society into the most fundamental resources and demands." He was thinking about refugee and migrant camps, which he believes resemble the cities of tomorrow—vast, organic settlements of people on the move—and designing a network of devices that can serve people there. "It's a bit like in Zen. You strip the mind down, to understand the core of what is important," Hedström had told me, that first night in Copenhagen. "I guess it's getting to the core." ♦



PERSONAL HISTORY

BEST FOOT FORWARD

How to feel about an "okay" rating of your feet by strangers on the Internet.

BY ZIWE

Unfortunately, I am on wikiFeet. For those who do not know, wikiFeet is a photo-sharing foot-fetish site dedicated to celebrities' feet. I found out that I was on it in 2019, at a time when I would not have described myself as a celebrity. A friend forwarded my rating to me, insisting that I had "made it." The idea that anyone would invest time and energy ogling my feet was beyond my comprehension, but it was true—I was featured on a Web site that averaged more than ten million visitors a month.

I do not judge the sexual proclivities of members of the wikiFeet community. But, personally, my sexual proclivity is that no one look at my feet, ever. To my horror, I learned that I had a wikiFeet rating of two stars, categorized as "okay feet." While "okay" is technically not an insult, it is not a compliment, either. I hate my feet. Also, I hate everyone else's feet. In my humble opinion, feet are just ugly hands, and hands are not that cute to begin with. But, though it's fine for me to have disdain for my extremities, for strangers to rate my ten toes as anything other than "perfect," "beautiful," or possibly "dainty" is a hate crime that should be punished to the fullest extent of the law. This may seem like an irrational reaction, but you are wrong and stupid, and also, shut up!

I am very self-conscious about the way that I look, in part because I am a woman who happens to be conscious. Since birth, every piece of media I have encountered has socialized me to hate all of my body parts. It didn't help that I was an ugly duckling. As a kid, my hair, which my mother insisted that I chemically straighten, was dry and brittle. Every six to eight weeks, she would slather my head in Just for Me No-Lye Conditioning Crème Relaxer, which burned my scalp. Where my natural hair would leave combs broken in its wake—there is a reason Lil Wayne rapped "tougher than Nigerian hair" in "A Milli"—my relaxed hair would break if a breeze hit it wrong. Worst of all, my hair looked nothing like that of the beaming child on the box, which makes sense—according to a recently trending topic on Twitter, the kids on the boxes did not use the product. When I used it, my hair became too flat and delicate to support hats, which might have been the best remedy for my shame.

I had severe eczema. The skin above my upper lip had darkened with scarring from a bad habit of nervously licking my lips. I looked like I had a Steve Harvey mustache that was impossible to shave. I also had discolored rings around my eyes. Years later, this discoloration would make it appear as if I always had on wispy eyeshadow, but at twelve years old I resembled King Julien, the lemur in "Madagascar."

I had body odor. As an adult, I am known for smelling as fresh as a tropical beach after a rainstorm, because I surround myself with candles and fragrances. However, when I was a child, I was unfamiliar with the concept of deodorant. For some reason, it had never been explained to me. Not to point any fingers, but my mother refused to buy me products that acknowledged that I had hit puberty, and instead told me to scrub my armpits harder. One issue for a stinky middle schooler is that people will actually remark on your scent. The most memorable conversation about my stinkiness was when my sixth-grade teacher, Mr. [REDACTED], pulled me aside during gym class to ask me if my parents were dead. Confused, but ever cheery, I informed him that they were not. He replied,

ILLUSTRATION BY MILLIE VON PLATEN

"Well, then, tell your mother to buy you deodorant."

I guess that, in Mr. [REDACTED]'s reality, the only logical explanation for my body odor was that I was an orphan whose parents' death in some freak accident had led to my subsequent neglect. I'm not sure that I would subject an eleven-year-old to such direct questioning about emotional trauma, but public schools are underfunded and sometimes you get what you pay for. Months later, I would get back at Mr. [REDACTED] by constantly reminding the class that he owed us a pizza party that he'd promised us if we had perfect attendance for a week, which, as an underpaid teacher, he probably couldn't afford—my bad.

I had other insecurities. For example, my clothes. When my mother was not trying to put me in traditional *geles* (Nigerian head wraps), I wore high-water pants from Marshalls and unlicensed graphic tees featuring not-Disney characters that were just slightly off (e.g., "101 Dalmatians" sweatshirts where the dogs were missing their signature spots). When Nelly's "Air Force Ones" ran up the *Billboard* charts, I did not have designer sneakers, and instead rocked orthopedic shoes. And I always wore granny panties that hiked up far above my waist, despite Manny Santos from "Degrassi: The Next Generation" empowering a generation of young millennials to wear thongs. All of this resulted in my classmates laughing at me, which, thanks to what my therapist describes as habitual dissociation, I did not process in real time.

None of these things were as difficult as being one of the only dark-skinned kids in my class, from kindergarten through high school. Before I became familiar with the liberal racism that would one day become a theme in my comedy, I learned that even marginalized people have a hierarchy of class and color. When I was in public school, I was one of the only dark people among a sea of fair-skinned Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Colombians. This would lead to ridicule, as children are both unimaginative and astonishingly rude. Things did not get better in private school, where I was one of the few Black kids in an ocean of Kennedyesque blonds and brunets with inherited wealth.

One time in the fifth grade, Mrs. [REDACTED] prompted me to do a presentation on "my perspective." I performed a standup routine in which I recited all the nicknames I had been given, such as Darkie and Africa. After my tight five minutes, which I absolutely slayed, my teacher quieted the class down and said, "That is sad." She then quickly changed the subject, and never acknowledged this "perspective" again (or followed up on the harassment I'd described).

This is a theme in my life. I share funny stories only to have my audience emphatically warn me never to repeat them. Here's a funny story that is actually sad. To celebrate Grandparents' Day, my second-grade teacher, Mrs. [REDACTED], asked her students to draw things that we liked to do with our grandparents. All of my grandparents were already dead, information that I politely relayed to my teacher, only for her to insist that I draw an image of what I would do with my grandparents if they were still alive. I drew a picture of four angels pushing me on a swing. I find this hilarious, though it's a story that friends tell me not to repeat. And now it's in print forever!

But back to my feet. I thought that I was ugly for a very long time and then, suddenly, I found myself on



wikiFeet, against my will, in the form of a photo of me from college, on a Lake Michigan beach, in a peach bathing suit from Forever 21. I remember posing for it and purposefully burying my toes in the sand to try to conceal them. I was not hiding my feet from the world; I was protecting the world from my feet. But the sand failed me, resulting in the one photo on social media in which I had not cropped out my feet entirely.

I Photoshopped this thirst trap to include the covers of the books "Animal Farm," "The New Jim Crow," "The Feminine Mystique," and "Twelve Years a Slave," as a parody of a then viral photo of the actor Matt McGorry shirtless, in glasses, reading "The New Jim Crow." I captioned my bikini pic " 'The New Jim Crow' by #MichelleAlexander is absolutely brilliant. Pls read full post." For years, I had been so careful not to let anything below my ankles be exposed for the Internet to see, but then there I was, on wikiFeet. No one's fault but my own—the lesson here is that no dank meme goes unpunished.

WikiFeet is one of the most innocuous demonstrations of the pros and cons of being a famous woman. The pros, of course, are celebrity, fortune, and an unlimited supply of fedoras that you could only ever dream of. The con is a total invasion of privacy wherein strangers rank your body parts on a message board.

Britney Spears, the defining celebrity of my childhood, is also on wikiFeet. On the surface, this seems like good company in which to find myself. I know the words to every Britney song and the moves to every Britney dance, and I can quote every Britney interview. When she performed "Oops! . . . I Did It Again" on Nickelodeon, I held my rainbow-colored Fisher-Price recorder up to the TV and taped it, telling my family to shut up until Britney finished. The single greatest resentment that I harbor as an adult is that someone threw away my Britney Spears Scholastic book, which I bought by collecting coins from in between couch cushions. *Someone* felt that Britney Spears did not set a good moral example, even though Britney Spears was one of the few things that made me happy. (My mother has yet to confess.)

Growing up, all I wanted was to be as confident, sexy, and desired as Britney Spears. Where I was an ugly outcast with crooked teeth and a Pigpen-ish halo of stench surrounding me, Britney Jean Spears was the princess of pop music. (Years later, a very

kind reporter for the New York *Times* would attempt to describe me, in a listing of my monthly comedy show, "Pop Show," as the "princess of pop," but the paper's fact-checking department would not budge, and instead I was characterized as someone who "may not be the princess of pop," which is not the same.) It wasn't until years later that I learned that one of my greatest influences had been placed under an oppressive conservatorship that allegedly forced her to perform against her will, prohibited her from going off birth control, and medicated her with lithium. What does it say about a society when one of its most famous women is held captive in plain sight as a result of our collective objectification?

The more I examined Britney Spears, the more our wikiFeet commonality felt less like an honor and more like an insidious tax on womanhood. The Britney Spears wikiFeet page, which has more than forty-four hundred total votes and an over-all four-star ranking of "nice feet," gets a bunch of impassioned wikiFeet comments.

One reads, "One of the most beautiful pics I've seen lately. Made me realize how much I missed Britney. If it wasn't for that chair this pic would be perfect."

Another: "I hate that friggin chair with every fiber of my being! It's as if fate decided to screw us over by ruining what could have been the best outdoor sole shots of Britney in the hot sun for all of us to enjoy! What a shame, it's an absolute travesty."

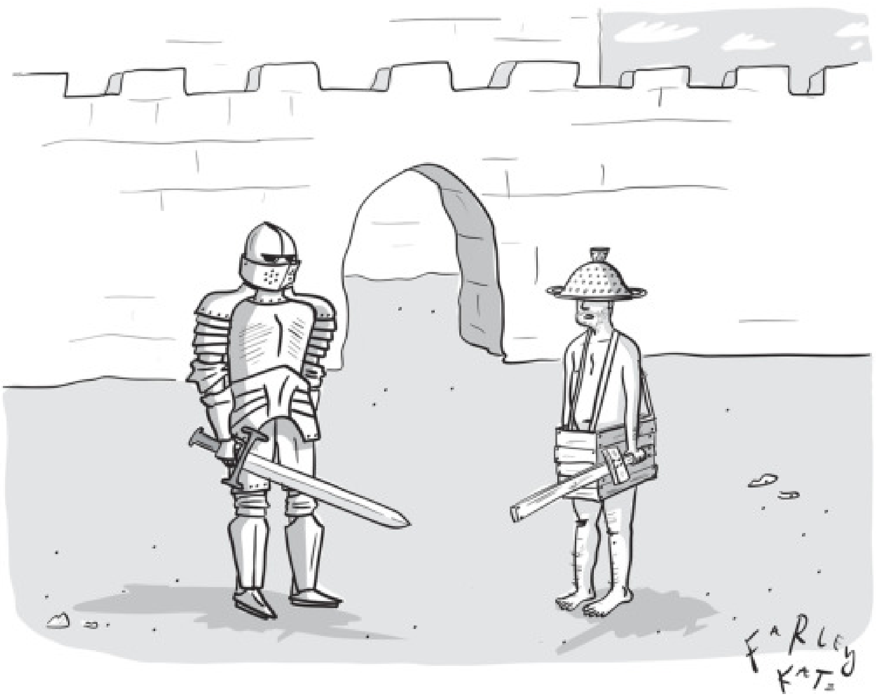
The people were upset at a chair for blocking Britney's feet. It was all a lot to process, but one comment stuck out to me: "I keep seeing comments on other pages that she has ugly feet. They aren't Victoria Justice level, but they are not ugly."

Now, why do we have to compare women's feet at all? Britney has her lane and Victoria has her lane and there is space for both these women's feet in this world. But, naturally, I had to research what was so good about Victoria Justice's feet. Which I was shocked to learn is . . . everything? Victoria Justice, formerly of the Nickelodeon show "Victorious," has more than nine thousand wikiFeet votes, with a rare five-star rating of "gorgeous feet." Not only does Ms. Justice have better, smaller feet than me but, appallingly, according to this wiki, she is also younger than me.

The comments on her page were also much hornier, especially on a photo of her stomping grapes: "Holy crap! I so want the wine that is made from these grapes! I would drink the win [sic] that Victoria help make with her sexy feet crushing those grapes!"

These people were so dizzy with lust that they couldn't spell "wine" correctly. Meanwhile, I had one succinct comment that just said, "Nice feet girl!" (6/27/2020, 12:22 P.M.). It comforted me to know that, at the height of a global pandemic, my sand-covered corns were providing some sweet soul enough solace to elicit a kind word. Still, I couldn't forget that my feet were officially ranked "okay." More specifically, among five voters, one voted "beautiful," one voted "nice," two voted "okay," and one hater voted "ugly." I am not sure the wikiFeet community realizes that, by reducing women to just their foot scores, they are dehumanizing us, but lack of intent doesn't lessen the impact. I am more than ten toes and eerily flat arches. I also have a beautiful heart beneath two medium-sized breasts. As such, I am demanding a call to action. Please go to wikifeet.com, create a user account on this collaborative, celebrity-foot database, and vote for me like my self-confidence depends on it.

Yes, though I am ashamed to admit it, I still care what people think about my feet. I care what people think about me. But the best lesson I ever internalized is that no one will love me, or my feet, like I love myself (and my feet). I learned this from an episode of the Japanese anime series "Sailor Moon." Loving myself is a tough task, and requires constantly reminding myself that I deserve patience and generosity and warmth (and compliments on my feet, which I should note are getting better by the day thanks to extreme procedures like chemical peels). Everyone and everything we know will soon turn to dust, except plastic, which will take hundreds of years to biodegrade. In the meantime, so what if my feet do not measure up to Victoria Justice's? They allow me the freedom to dance to Britney Spears with my friends. ♦



"Laundry day."

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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

BLOOMSBURY CHIC

The English group's revolt against dour Victoriana inspires designers today.

BY REBECCA MEAD

In July, 1918, Virginia Woolf spent a weekend at Garsington—a country home, outside Oxford, owned by Lady Ottoline Morrell, a celebrated hostess of the era, and her husband, Philip Morrell, a Member of Parliament. The house, a ramshackle Jacobean mansion that the Morrells had acquired five years earlier, had been vividly redecorated by Ottoline into what one guest called a "fluttering parrot-house of greens, reds and yellows." One sitting room was painted with a translucent seafoam wash; another was covered in deep Venetian red, and early visitors were invited to apply thin lines of gold paint to the edges of wooden panels. The entrance hall was laid with Persian carpets and, as Morrell's biographer Miranda Seymour has written, the pearly gray paint on the walls was streaked with pink, "to create the effect of a winter sunset." Woolf, in her diary, noted that the Italianate garden fashioned by Morrell—with paved terraces, brilliantly colored flower beds, and a pond surrounded by yew-tree hedges clipped with niches for statuary—was "almost melodramatically perfect."

Woolf characterized Morrell herself with a note of satire, observing that her conversational "drift is always almost bewilderingly meandering." While on an afternoon walk, Morrell had leaned on a parasol and offered a discourse on love—"Isn't it sad that no one *really* falls in love nowadays?"—before declaring her dedication to the natural world and to literature. "We asked the poor old ninny why, with this passion for literature, she didn't write," Woolf wrote. Morrell replied, "Ah, but I've no time—never any time. Besides, I have such wretched health—But the pleasure of creation, Virginia, must transcend all others."

Morrell, who was born in 1873, just nine years before Woolf—hardly an old-ninny interval—may not have written novels, but she certainly took pleasure in creation. As if to accompany her lush décor, she cultivated an extravagant persona, especially through her clothing. Her contemporaries found the performance at once irresistible and risible. The poet and writer Siegfried Sassoon, visiting Garsington in 1916, remarked on Morrell's "voluminous pale-pink Turkish trousers." Desmond MacCarthy, the British critic, described one of Morrell's hats as being "like a crimson tea cosy trimmed with hedgehogs."

Morrell is one of the most chronicled and caricatured figures connected with the Bloomsbury group, the association of writers, artists, and thinkers who, in the early twentieth century, shared living spaces in a district of London known for its leafy squares, and whose intellectual and erotic paths intertwined well after those residential arrangements ended. Lytton Strachey, the critic, who was a frequent guest of Morrell's, said that she was, like Garsington itself, "very impressive, patched, gilded and preposterous." According to the artist Vanessa Bell, Woolf's sister, Morrell had "a terrifically energetic and vigorous character with a definite rather bad taste." D. H. Lawrence—not himself a part of the Bloomsbury group, but well acquainted with its members—drew on Morrell in his characterization of Hermione Roddice, the aloof, domineering heiress in "Women in Love." ("People were silent when she passed, impressed, roused, wanting to jeer, yet for some reason silenced.") Morrell, who kept a diary, declared in one entry that "conventionality is

Lady Ottoline Morrell, a Bloomsbury hostess, wrote, "Conventionality is deadness."

CECIL BEATON / © CONDÉ NAST

deadness," but she was conventional enough to be hurt by her friends' sniping. Lawrence's portrait extinguished their friendship.

Lady Ottoline's marriage to Philip, which began in 1902, combined observance of convention with its subversion. The Morrells had two children—a daughter, Julian, and her twin brother, Hugh, who died soon after birth—and remained together until Ottoline's death, in 1938. But both had numerous external relationships. Around the time of Virginia Woolf's visit to Garsington, Philip fathered two children outside his marriage, one with his secretary and another with his wife's former maid. Ottoline, meanwhile, was engaged in a long-term affair with the philosopher Bertrand Russell. Another of Ottoline's lovers had been Augustus John, the artist, whose painting of her, made in 1919, today hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Ottoline, who was six feet tall even before putting on the scarlet high heels she favored, is dressed in a black velvet gown with enormous puffed sleeves and a square neckline edged with lace, and wears atop her massed auburn curls a gargantuan black hat. She lifts her chin and looks sidelong down her nose, the regard in her deep-set eyes striking a precarious balance between imperiousness and insecurity.

One morning this past July, Sarah Glenn, a textile conservator based in London, eased a protective sheath off a tailor's dummy in her studio, in the Battersea district, to reveal a dress belonging to the collection of the Fashion Museum in Bath. The black velvet evening gown, which had a square neck edged with lace, puffed sleeves, and a fishtail skirt, had once belonged to Lady Ottoline. It may not have been the exact one she wore while sitting for Augustus John; Morrell had loved the style so much that she had owned repeat models over the years. Exposed on either side of the rib cage was a pair of heavy-duty zippers—an innovation introduced to dressmaking during the Jazz Age. The tubular sleeve was so narrow that Morrell must have found it challenging to bend her elbows. At the upper arm, the sleeve burst into a voluptuous puff, which would have made Morrell's shoulders appear as broad as a rugby player's. With a silhouette that offered exaggerated nods to both femininity and masculinity, the dress was less clothing than costume; its gender ambiguities brought to mind Rei Kawakubo's archly stylized designs for Comme des Garçons, with their distorted shoulders and hips. The gown, probably fabricated by Morrell's longtime dressmaker, was a bold expression of Morrell's creativity, with herself as the medium.

The velvet dress, along with several other items from Morrell's wardrobe, goes on display this month in an exhibition, "Bring No Clothes," which explores the Bloomsbury group's use of, and influence on, clothing and fashion. (The title quotes an instruction that Virginia Woolf gave to T. S. Eliot in 1920 before he joined her for a weekend in the country—she was encouraging him to leave constrictive finery behind.) The show, curated by Charlie Porter, a fashion journalist and the author of "What Artists Wear," is being held in Lewes, a town in East Sussex, at a new gallery run by the Charleston Trust, which also owns the seventeenth-century farmhouse, seven miles outside town, that was once the home of Vanessa Bell and her sometime partner Duncan Grant, the artist. Bell was in what amounted to an open marriage with the art critic Clive Bell, and took up residence with Grant during the First World War, when Grant, a conscientious objector, needed to find farmwork, an approved alternative to fighting. Though Grant generally slept with men—among them the writer David Garnett and the economist John Maynard Keynes, both of whom spent many nights at Charleston—he and Vanessa Bell had a child together, Angelica, who was born at the farmhouse. (Angelica later added a further tangle to these arrangements by marrying Garnett.) Vanessa Bell died in 1961, and Grant continued to live at Charleston until his death, in 1978. The house subsequently became a museum. It stands next to a working farm, complete with the evocative smell of the barnyard.

During Bell and Grant's tenure, the house was idiosyncratically decorated by its inhabitants, in a joyful blurring of the boundary between art and life. The walls, the furnishings, the mantels, the woodwork, and even the sides of a bathtub were riotously painted with floral and geometrical patterns, still-lifes, and sturdy nudes. The shared spaces and the bedrooms were occupied by spouses, lovers, and friends, among whom habits of Edwardian decorum were happily discarded. Virginia Woolf, for one, was married to the scholar and editor Leonard Woolf, but she had romantic relationships with women, most notably the writer and garden designer Vita Sackville-West.

In recent years, a new space has been added to the Charleston site, offering temporary exhibitions of contemporary artists working in the spirit of Charleston's earlier occupants. (An upcoming show centers on intimate drawings by David Hockney of friends and lovers in domestic settings.) Under its current director, Nathaniel Hepburn, who took over in 2017, Charleston has embraced more fully its heritage as a site of radical politics and personal self-invention—or, as Hepburn told me, "a place where people came to imagine how life might be lived differently."

The new gallery in Lewes, in a former office building, is an extension of this mission. "Bring No Clothes" emulates Charleston's mode of casual ornamentation: there are no fastidiously reconstructed interiors with mannequins posed on chairs. Instead, the show wittily throws together a wide range of objects, both historical and contemporary. In a section devoted to Bloomsbury's affinity for handcrafts, a series of portraits of Vanessa Bell is shown alongside a multicolored rag rug fashioned from her worn-out clothing—an artifact recovered from the drafty floors at Charleston. A copy of "Orlando," Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel about a gender-switching aristocrat, inscribed to Sackville-West—the inspiration for the story—is displayed, as are three costumes that Kawakubo designed for a 2019 operatic adaptation of the book, by the composer Olga Neuwirth.

Porter has also included items from contemporary artists and designers who share a kinship with the group. These include Jawara Alleyne, a Jamaican-born designer whose use of safety pins

to fasten slashed fabric echoes the handmade aesthetic of Charleston, and Ella Boucht, a young London-based designer who creates tailored clothes and leather garments that celebrate butch identity. Among other things, the exhibition makes a strong case that the Bloomsbury group's approach to resisting social norms—playful, exploratory, ever-shifting—set the stage for current notions of gender and sexual fluidity. Clothing was never the focus of the group, but, as Porter's exhibit text notes, "fashion provided a language with which to explore their break away from tradition."

Few garments that belonged to the key members of the Bloomsbury group have survived. Scholars have written about the significance of gloves in the novels of Virginia Woolf; in an early iteration of "Mrs. Dalloway," "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street," it is gloves rather than flowers that Clarissa Dalloway says that she will buy herself in the first line. But none of the gloves that Woolf wore in her lifetime are thought to exist today. The only piece of Woolf's clothing known to have survived is a black Chinese-silk shawl decorated with green foliage and salmon-colored flowers and birds. It was a gift from the generous Lady Ottoline Morrell.

How Woolf, Bell, and others dressed, and how they thought about what they wore, has been preserved principally in their texts, photographs, and art works. On display in Lewes is the diary of Grace Higgens, who served as a housekeeper for Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant at Charleston, which reveals with clarity what happened to Bell's clothing after her death: "Had a bonfire & burnt Mrs Bells mattress & lots of her clothes, & pillows." Porter told me, "It confirms the absolute absence of sentimentality about clothes. From this, you can kind of presume what happened to Virginia Woolf's clothes. There would have been no sense of holding on to things."

In the letter in which Woolf advised T. S. Eliot to "bring no clothes" for a visit to the country, she added, by way of explication, "We live in a state of the greatest simplicity." In conventional society of the time, hosts and guests at a country house would change their clothes several times a day, culminating in a formal outfit for dinner. Woolf may have dispensed with such rules, but she was hardly free of anxiety about clothing. Her journals are filled with comments about the inadequacies of her wardrobe. On multiple occasions, she decries herself as badly dressed (a verdict sometimes endorsed by other members of her circle). In 1915, Woolf considers attending a party, reminding herself that she will "see beautiful people, & get a sensation of being on the highest crest of the biggest wave," then decides against it. "There is vanity," she writes. "I have no clothes to go in."



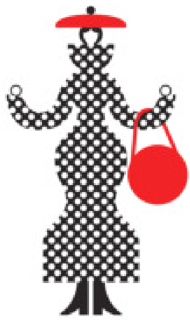
Judging by photographs taken at Garsington and elsewhere, Woolf appears to have settled at a young age on an aesthetic—long, lean lines, with little trussing at the waist or fussing at the neckline—that rejects some of the strictures of dress placed on women in the first decades of the twentieth century. But, if Woolf was careless of certain Edwardian forms of sartorial constraint, she was mindful of others: "It seems to me quite impossible to wear trousers," she wrote in a 1917 letter, observing the bolder choices of others, such as the artist Dora Carrington—who preferred to be called by only her last name. Carrington wore corduroy trousers and jodhpurs, and styled her hair in a short, blunt bob that threatened to obscure her face. Porter has found a snapshot of Woolf reclining outdoors on a chaise longue during a vacation in Devon, dressed in what she would have meant by "no clothes": a loose sweater and a calf-length skirt revealing stockings and leather pumps.

If Woolf found self-expression through dressing down, she was also aware of the pleasure and the power offered by dressing up. In April, 1925, just before the publication of "Mrs. Dalloway," Woolf wrote in her diary of the happiness of commissioning a new garment: "Going to my dressmaker in Judd Street, or rather thinking of a dress I could get her to make, & imagining it made—that is the string, which as if it dipped loosely into a wave of treasure brings up pearls sticking to it." A few days later, she expressed a desire to explore "the party consciousness, the frock consciousness, &c."—her now celebrated coinage for the ways an individual's sense of self can

be altered by what she puts on her body. Her reflections were prompted by a visit, earlier that day, to a studio in the Marylebone district of London, where she sat for Maurice Adams Beck and Helen MacGregor, the chief photographers of British *Vogue*. In the resulting portrait, she sits in a dark dress, one hand sheathed in a pale glove, with its mate resting on her lap. The experience had given her occasion to consider the exclusionary function of the fashion system, "where people secrete an envelope which connects them & protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies."

In addition to being formally photographed by professionals, Woolf and her circle were captured in casual snapshots. Porter has rummaged through Bloomsbury albums for images, and among his finds are photographs of Grant and others shirtless, semi-clothed, or naked—a freedom permitted by the privacy of the enclosed gardens at properties such as Charleston and Garsington. (One can presumably still streak at Garsington, which remains a private home.) Lady Ottoline Morrell frequently brandished a camera, capturing her guests in moments of relaxed deshabille, or in bohemian tea-party ensembles. She pasted the photographs into albums and often gave copies of the images to the subjects; many of them are now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery.

Though the luminous color combinations painted on the cupboards and mantelpieces at Charleston suggest that the Bloomsbury group embraced an adventurous palette, it is hard to say how far this approach was extended to clothing, given that its members were photographed almost exclusively in black-and-white. (In a 1911 Duncan Grant portrait of Woolf, her sitting figure is surrounded by Fauvist swaths of orange and green, but her dress is rendered in black.) A photograph from 1923 shows Woolf seated on a garden bench at Garsington, smoking a cigarette and wearing a long, unstructured pin-tucked dress, a lace shawl, and a broad-brimmed hat trimmed with pale feathers. One can only guess at the combination of colors and tones. The written record, at least, suggests that Woolf's palette could be vivid. Sackville-West, whom Woolf met in the early nineteen-twenties, remarked in 1922 that Woolf was dressed more smartly than she had last seen her: "That is to say, the woolen orange stockings were replaced by yellow silk ones, but she still wore pumps." Porter has observed, aptly, that the description "sounds like a styling decision taken today backstage at Prada."



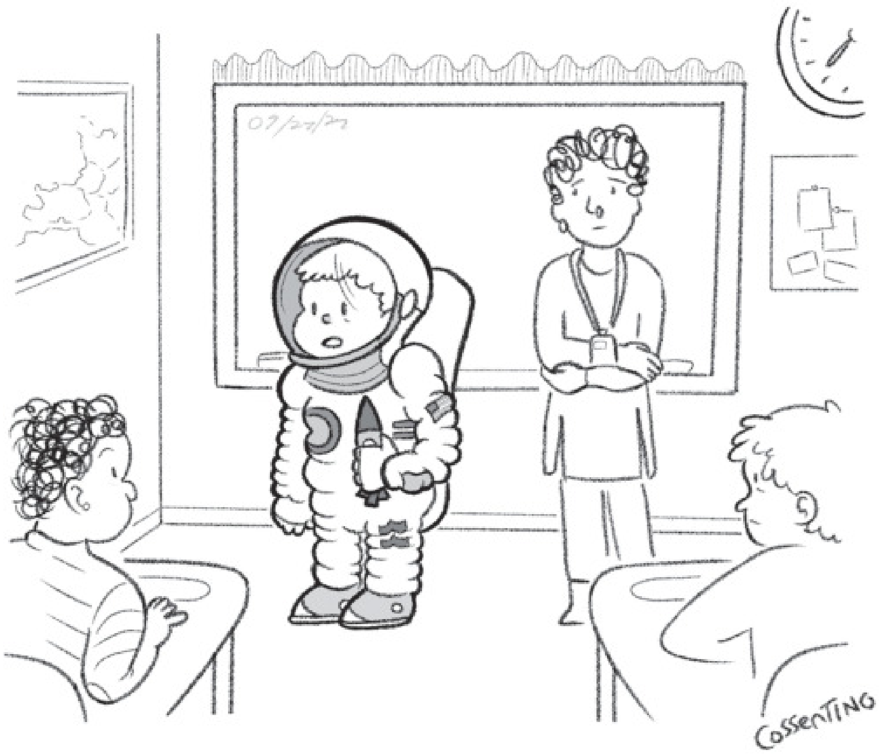
Similarly, Porter unearths accounts by Woolf and others that reveal what surviving photographs obscure. In a 1916 letter from Woolf to Bell, the outfit of their sister-in-law Karin Stephen, designed by Bell, is described sardonically as "a skirt barred with reds and yellows of the vilest kind, a peagreen blouse on top, with a gaudy handkerchief on her head." Woolf jokes, "I shall retire into dove colour and old lavender, with a lace collar and lawn wristlets"—the Edwardian colors and styles that the sisters had clearly left behind.

It is an accident of fate—and of class—that Lady Ottoline Morrell's clothes were preserved by her descendants after her death. Her wardrobe offers a rare sample of the material texture of Bloomsbury, and the inventive ways in which its members sought to fashion themselves anew. At the exhibition, Morrell's garments have been lined up like runway models at the end of a contemporary designer's show. "Morrell spoke in her journal of how her preferred look was long and plain—she *thinks* her look is very simple," Porter said. "But it seems to me that she is responding to her own features and exaggerating things because of the way she looked herself, rather than trying to hide anything." Given Morrell's height, hair, and hauteur, she was well aware that she looked striking and odd. Indeed, her appearance qualified as what she and her contemporaries would have called "queer"—that is, peculiar. In "Women in Love," Hermione Roddice is described as "waving her head up and down, and waving her hand slowly in dismissal, smiling a strange affected smile, making a tall queer, frightening figure."

Alongside the "Bring No Clothes" exhibition, Porter has published a book that shares the title. In both, he aims to demonstrate how people in the Bloomsbury circle used clothing, fashion, and the rejection of fashion to liberate themselves in a way that presages the modern usage of "queer" as an umbrella term for "not straight." "I describe myself as 'queer' rather than 'gay,' even though I am a gay male," Porter writes. "The word is specific enough to have meaning, broad enough to give all queer humans the space to be themselves."

Porter is not alone in the world of the arts and fashion in finding that the Bloomsbury group speaks to contemporary notions of queerness: the actor Emma Corrin, who is nonbinary, recently starred in a West End adaptation of "Orlando," which the lesbian writer Jeanette Winterson has categorized as "the first English language trans novel." The British designer and artist Luke Edward Hall—whose interior schemes for homes, restaurants, and retail venues, with their clashing patterns and vibrant colors, are informed by the aesthetic of Charleston—has recently launched a line of home goods and gender-neutral clothing, called Chateau Orlando, that includes baggy floral shorts and the kind of boxy sweater-vests that are perfect for a weekend in an inadequately heated country pile. Porter writes that, if Woolf were alive today, "we might imagine her identifying as non-binary or trans." At the same time, he acknowledges that it is anachronistic to re-gender people who lived a century ago. What Woolf writes of the Elizabethans in "Orlando"—"Their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even"—is equally true today of our distance from the Bloomsbury era.

Porter's most novel contribution to Bloomsbury scholarship is to look at the group's artifacts from the vantage of contemporary queer culture. He offers an analysis of a portrait painted by Duncan Grant of his friend Harry Daley, a policeman who had a long affair with



“But realistically? Finance.”

the Bloomsbury-group associate E. M. Forster. Daley, unusually for the time, was relatively open about being gay—protected from the legal prohibition on homosexuality by his position in law enforcement. Porter, writing about Daley’s snug police uniform, which is garlanded with chains and buckles, notes, “Daley is entirely covered, but to queer eyes the coded language of the garments tells a different story. . . . It speaks of fantasies in which a policeman forces a suspect to submit, or conversely, a suspect gets the upper hand.” In the book “Bring No Clothes,” Porter gives what stands for a credo: “The queer members of the Bloomsbury group had to navigate prohibitive societal norms to find ways to exist. By looking at their clothing, these strategies for living come to the fore. It can make us realize that, even today, we all live by such codes, as much as we believe that we are free.”

Just as Vanessa Bell painted her wardrobe and her fireplace with highly personal designs, she made her own clothes, sometimes from textiles that she had created. These garments were proudly unfussy, with ragged hems, and at least some of them were colorful. In a 1915 letter, Bell told Grant she was making a dress that “will be mostly purple,” adding, “I’m going to make myself a bright green blouse or coat.” Grant, for his part, improvised turbans out of lengths of cloth, and mixed styles with dashing ease: Woolf wrote that, at Charleston, Grant could be found “incredibly wrapped round with yellow waistcoats, spotted ties, & old blue stained painting jackets.” The D.I.Y. aesthetic of Charleston has inspired Porter to explore making his own clothes. The first time I met him, he wore a pair of lightweight pants with a ribbed elastic waistband, like maternity wear, and a shirt fashioned from two panels of cotton in different patterns and of different lengths, so that the front was shorter than the back. In “Bring No Clothes,” he writes, “Spending this time with the Bloomsbury group has pushed my thinking about garments wide open.”

The mishmashed Bloomsbury aesthetic continues to inspire. For many interior designers, the painterly clutter of Charleston offers an alternative path after decades of white walls and sleek industrial furnishings. At the bar of the Beaverbrook Town House, a new hotel in the Chelsea district of London, teal tiles and maroon glass clash delightfully with crowded shelves of ornately patterned pottery. English designers such as Tess Newall and Jermaine Gallacher have made a specialty of applying whimsical designs directly to walls. *Architectural Digest*, which recently declared that the “irreverent chic” of the Bloomsbury group “is making a comeback,” quoted Gallacher as saying that, whenever he designs a space, he tries “to include a cheeky mural or hand-painted surface.”

Today’s fashion runways are full of the kind of gender play favored by the Bloomsbury set. The fall/winter, 2023, collection of Prada prominently features ties for women; Armani, meanwhile, is offering patterned shawls for men. The kind of brightly colored stockings that Woolf favored are back in style, too. For some contemporary fashion designers, Bloomsbury is a central point of reference. Among them is the British Turkish designer Erdem Moralioglu, whose spring, 2022, collection was inspired both by Lady Ottoline Morrell’s clothes and by Dame Edith Sitwell, a Bloomsbury satellite whom Woolf described, upon first meeting her, as “a very tall young woman, wearing a permanently startled expression, & curiously finished off with a high green silk headdress.” Moralioglu told me that he finds the Bloomsbury era “such an interesting, progressive time,” adding, “The fluidity between relationships was fascinating.” His collection included slim floral dresses with flared skirts that hit mid-calf, broad-brimmed hats, and sensible brogues of the sort in which one might comfortably climb a country hillside, lean on a parasol, and announce one’s dedication to the natural world and to literature. The runway show took place in Bloomsbury, at the British Museum, laid out beneath that institution’s neoclassical colonnade, so that the models were quite literally following in the footsteps of their historical antecedents.

Perhaps the fashion industry’s most prominent Bloomsbury aficionado is

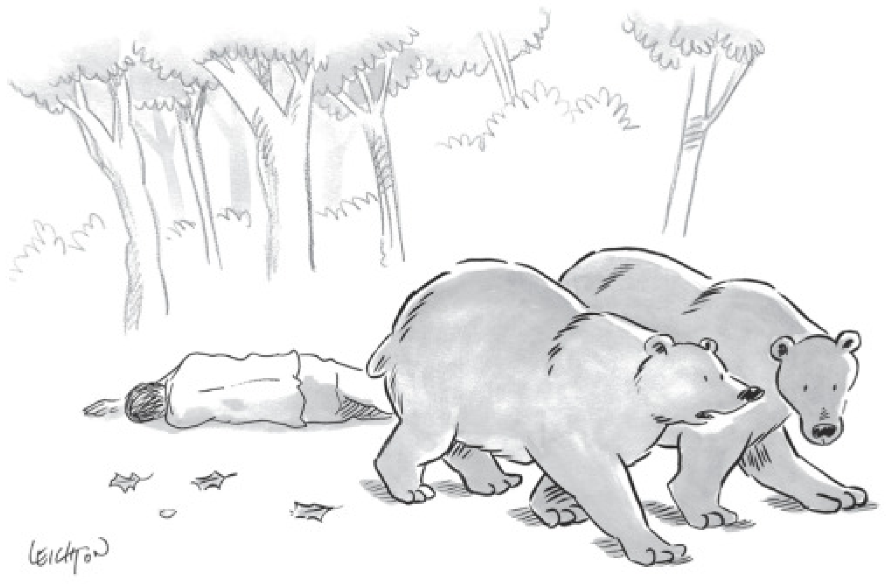
Kim Jones, the artistic director of Fendi womenswear and Dior menswear. Jones, who is forty-four, spent time in Lewes growing up, and first visited Charleston on a school trip when he was in his teens. "It struck a chord with me—the way that these people lived exactly how they wanted to live," Jones told me. "It was almost like punk. They really shook off the semblance of Victoriana they grew up with." In recent years, Jones's success as a designer and a fashion executive has given him the resources to amass an enormous library of manuscripts, letters, paintings, and objects related to the Bloomsbury group. Among the letters is a 1923 note that Virginia Woolf sent to T. S. Eliot, in his capacity as editor of the *Criterion*, offering him "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" for publication. (Eliot declined.)

When Jones was creating his spring, 2023, collection for Dior Men, he immersed himself in the life and aesthetic of Duncan Grant. The resulting collection offered baggy, flapping raincoats, chunky shoes, and shorts paired with thick socks—a fantasia on the kinds of garment Grant wore to dash from the painting studio to the walled garden at Charleston. Several items from the Dior collection are on display in Lewes, alongside the images and works of Grant that helped inspire them. A hand-knitted sweater bears a design, featuring two female nudes, that Grant made for a curtain at a London theatre; a zip-up jacket features a lily-pond-like pattern that Grant painted on a table for the bedroom at Charleston used by John Maynard Keynes.

Jones's Bloomsbury collection will eventually be bequeathed to Charleston, and he has acquired a defunct elementary school in Sussex which is to become a scholarly repository for books and manuscripts and other objects. For the moment, though, he lives with the collection in his homes, in Sussex and in London. In Sussex, Jones has hung up two male nudes by Grant, whose private erotic drawings of men were the focus of an exhibition at Charleston last year. In London, a spacious and elegant lavender-colored living room displays six Bloomsbury-era paintings along a single wall, among them a Post-Impressionist portrait by Grant of Vanessa Bell wearing an orange dress trimmed with green, with a yellow shawl over her head. The work was bought at auction in London last year for more than three hundred thousand pounds—a record high for Grant. Jones is lending it to the "Bring No Clothes" show, along with a number of other treasures, including the copy of "Orlando" inscribed to Sackville-West, which he bought a few years ago. Jones owns eleven copies of the novel, nine of them inscribed by the author to different members of the Bloomsbury group. "The book is more relevant now than it was when it came out, just shy of a hundred years ago," Jones told me. "And it will probably speak even more to the generation a hundred years from now."

"What a pity one can't now and then change sexes!" Lytton Strachey once wrote to Clive Bell, adding, "I should love to be a dowager Countess." To Strachey, Morrell once declared that she wished she were a man, "for then we should get on so wonderfully." As Strachey's biographer Michael Holroyd has observed, the two often *did* get on wonderfully, neither of them conforming to the prevailing expectations of masculinity and femininity. When Strachey came to stay at Garsington, he and Lady Ottoline enjoyed dipping into her wardrobe, treating its contents like a box of costumes. Morrell wrote of one visit, "At night Lytton would become gay and we would laugh and giggle and be foolish; sometimes he would put on a pair of my smart high-heeled shoes, which made him look like an Aubrey Beardsley drawing, very wicked." (Beardsley, a contemporary of Morrell's, was known for his erotic and disturbing pen-and-ink drawings, including illustrations of Oscar Wilde's play "Salomé.") Morrell wrote of Strachey, "I love to see him in my memory tottering and pirouetting round the room with feet looking so absurdly small, peeping in and out of his trousers, both of us so excited and happy, getting more and more fantastic and gay."

In the "Bring No Clothes" book, Porter peers into the sometimes transparent, sometimes occluded queerness of several Bloomsbury figures. In a chapter on Keynes, who famously had a prodigious count of lovers, Porter turns his queer eye to the photographic record. He notes Keynes's dominant stance when captured in conversation with his sometime partner Grant—left hand shoved into his pants pocket, pelvis tilted forward, shoulders back. "Keynes's pose breaks with the respectfulness of the tailored suit," Porter writes. "It says, I want more now. It



"The ironic thing is, I was more scared of him than he was of me."

also says, I claim power." Porter finds another image of the pair taken a few years later to have similar body language: Keynes has his hands on his clearly irrepressible hips. Elsewhere, Porter writes with subtlety about Carrington's efforts to find language for an identity that today might be categorized as nonbinary. In a 1925 letter rejecting a former lover, Gerald Brenan, Carrington tells him, "You know I have always hated being a woman. . . . I am continually depressed by my effeminacy." Writing elsewhere of an affair with the American journalist Henrietta Bingham, Carrington confesses to having "a day-dream" of "not being female." Porter's book illuminates the ways in which gender norms, no less than norms of sexual orientation, were up for grabs among the Bloomsbury set, even while certain social conventions, including marriage, were observed. (Both Keynes and Carrington married partners of the opposite sex; Strachey was unusual in Bloomsbury circles for never marrying.)

Despite the assertion of Miranda Seymour, Morrell's most recent biographer, that "lesbianism played no part in Ottoline's life"—a judgment that echoes that of an earlier biographer, Sandra Jobson Darroch—Porter believes that there is ample reason to count Morrell among the queer women of Bloomsbury. In a well-known sequence of photographs taken in the gardens at Garsington in the summer of 1917, Carrington, then in her early twenties, climbs naked upon a muscular statue of a male figure, against whom her own athleticism is counterposed. Porter points out that Morrell was holding the camera. He includes a photograph of Morrell lying naked alongside a row of shrubs at Garsington, a trail of discarded clothes behind her. Morrell, twenty years Carrington's senior, is lithe-limbed, with the slack belly of a woman who has borne children. The photographer is unknown, but Porter suggests that Morrell and Carrington exchanged the camera as they robed and disrobed.

Porter also advances a theory that Morrell and Virginia Woolf may have fleetingly been lovers. He cites, among other suggestive evidence, a remark in a letter to Vanessa Bell from Roger Fry, an art critic in the Bloomsbury group, that Morrell and Woolf "have fallen into each other's arms." At the very least, Porter argues, it makes sense to consider Woolf and Morrell as "queer comrades." In an inspired bit of sleuthing, Porter considers a photograph of Woolf shot for *Vogue* in 1924, a year before the celebrated glove-holding portrait. Woolf is shown wearing a dress that is usually described as having belonged to her mother, Julia Stephen. Porter is skeptical: the dress's style, he shows, does not resemble any garments known to have been worn by Stephen, who was much photographed, being a great beauty. Instead, Porter hazards, the dress, with its dramatically puffed sleeves and its low, lace-edged neckline, which gapes around Woolf's slender collarbone as if it were several sizes too big for her, may have been loaned to the novelist by her friend Morrell: a token of affection, and perhaps more, passed between them.

As Morrell's wardrobe was being studied, the garments betrayed other details about the Bloomsbury group and their friends, enemies, and supporters—scraps of their lives that have escaped the bonfire of time. When curators at the Fashion Museum in Bath peeked into the pockets of a pair of high-waisted, balloon-legged pants made from soft, indigo-colored cotton velvet, they found remnants of Ottoline's cigarettes, perhaps left over from a walk in the countryside around Garsington.

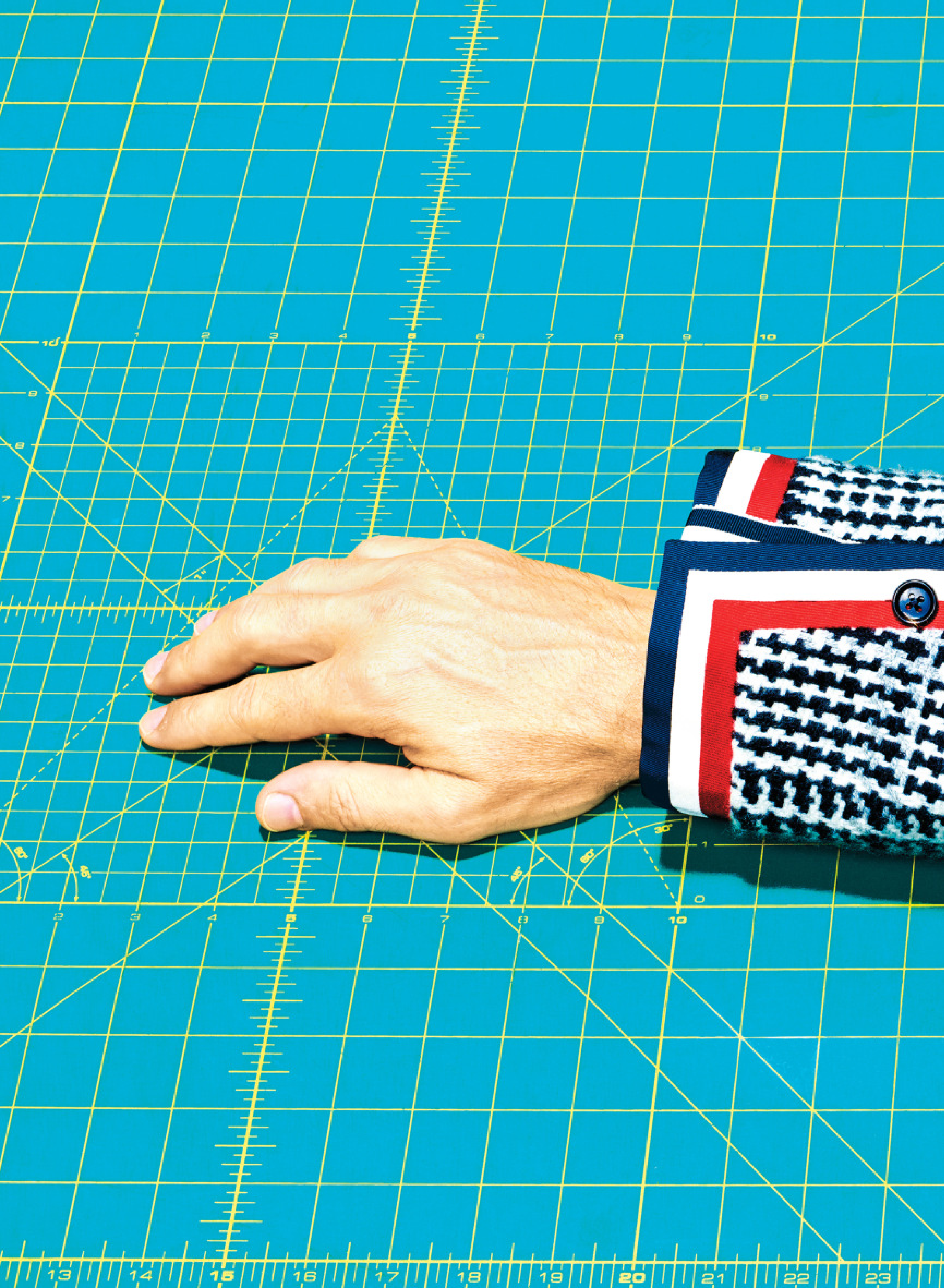
Also on display in Lewes is a long black velvet tunic, embroidered with gold thread in geometric patterns, in a knockoff of a style popularized by the Spanish couturier Fortuny. Morrell may have been an aristocrat, but she was not as wealthy as she looked—financial pressures eventually forced her and Philip to sell Garsington—and she preferred to have her clothes made locally, rather than in the ateliers of Europe. Stitching irregularities suggest that the tunic was made by Morrell's own dressmaker. The inside of the neckline is stained with an oily residue, probably from makeup. It looks like the dirty collar of a five-year-old who has hurriedly used her T-shirt to wipe her mouth—and therefore suggests the careless vivacity of the wearer, as an evening with friends grew more and more fantastic and gay.

Shortly before "Bring No Clothes" was installed in Lewes, Porter made a discovery about another Morrell garment that he'd selected for the show, a gauzy tunic of undyed linen, edged with ceramic beads. The front is patterned with eight repeating floral motifs outlined in dull green; some of the petals are colored in pale pink and blue. Porter researched the Fortuny archives and found that this garment was in fact genuine, except for one inauthentic detail: on the original, the floral pattern was printed without color.

Like Morrell's puffed-sleeve velvet gown, the tunic had gone to the conservation studio in Battersea. When it was withdrawn from its tissue-lined box and carefully laid out on a worktable, Porter recalled something that he had been told earlier by a costume researcher named Gill MacGregor: the pink and blue on the fabric wasn't evenly distributed. Unlike the green outlines, the petals seemed to have been colored in by hand. The tunic had been modified, embellished to suit the inclinations of Morrell, who—like so many of her guests, and friends, and lovers—saw no reason to adhere to the prescribed tastes of the time, in matters sartorial or otherwise.

It was impossible to say who had been responsible for the alteration. Most likely, the handiwork—like the irregular stitching elsewhere on Morrell's clothes—was that of her dressmaker. But wasn't it possible to imagine Morrell taking up a paintbrush on her own, just like the artists with whom she surrounded herself? Among the objects that survive her are several sewing boxes, filled with brightly colored thread. "She could make dresses herself—she talks about making dresses as a child," Porter said. Even if there was no telltale paintbrush among the needles and bobbins, it was nonetheless tempting to believe that Morrell had made her mark, experiencing for herself the transcendent pleasure of creation. ♦


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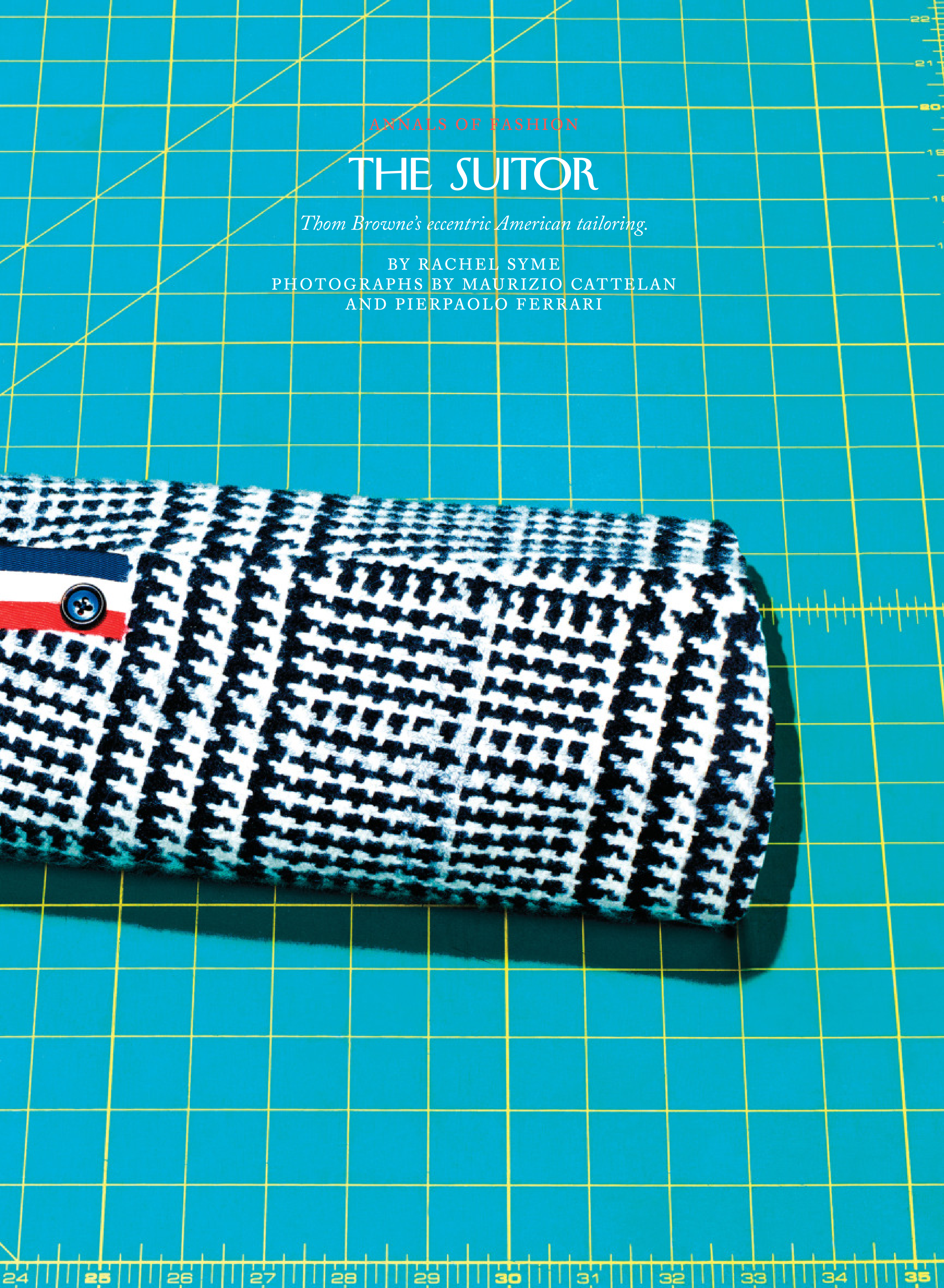


ANNALS OF FASHION

THE SUITOR

Thom Browne's eccentric American tailoring.

BY RACHEL SYME
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAURIZIO CATTELAN
AND PIERPAOLO FERRARI



Every new employee of the American fashion designer Thom Browne receives a "starter kit" of his brand's clothing worth some ten thousand dollars retail, including, among other items, two gray suits, five white oxford shirts, one gray wool tie, and one white pocket square. An eleven-page PDF lays out, through visual aids and bullet points, the rules for how to wear what Browne refers to as "uniform" (never "the uniform" or "a uniform"). Top buttons must remain undone. Shirts are not to be ironed. Neckties, a required accessory, should be tucked tightly into waistbands. Suit pants may be swapped out for a pleated skirt, regardless of one's gender; Browne, a proponent of androgynous dressing, has been putting men in skirts for more than a decade. Exceptions to the rules are doled out cautiously: the color navy is permitted Friday through Sunday but discouraged during the week; seersucker can be worn in the summer months, and white sneakers only on weekends.

One afternoon in early July, I went to Avenue Montaigne, a luxury shopping promenade in Paris's Eighth Arrondissement, to visit Browne's French headquarters. In two days, Browne would, for the first time, present a runway show as part of Haute Couture Week. He was one of only a handful of American designers in the past fifty years to be invited to participate alongside such storied couture houses as Fendi, Chanel, and Schiaparelli. But the timing for a high-fashion pageant suddenly felt off. A few days earlier, a policeman had shot and killed an unarmed teen-ager of Algerian descent during a traffic stop in the Paris suburbs, sparking protests across the country. I had flown in on a red-eye expecting to find a city on edge. Yet on Avenue Montaigne the mood was serene. Pedestrians sauntered along a row of European flagship boutiques nestled in battlements of creamy limestone: Gucci, YSL, Prada, Louis Vuitton. At No. 30, Christian Dior occupied the same site where, more than seventy-five years ago, the designer unveiled his nipped-waist New Look silhouette. Browne's shop, at No. 17, is unmarked and open by appointment only, and when I saw the building, a blocky beige office tower that stood out from the elegant architecture like a bucktooth, I wondered if I was in the right place.

Then I spotted an unmistakable trio of Browne employees, smoking cigarettes on the corner. One wore a suit paired with high-top lace-up brogues. Another was in seersucker shorts and a matching cinched waistcoat. The third had on a cropped cashmere vest over a sleeveless oxford shirt. The outfits were all variations on the archetypal Thom Browne ensemble: a "shrunken" gray suit with jacket sleeves that end above the wrists, lapels as thin and sharp as paring knives, and pant legs that are cut some three inches above the ankle, revealing what Browne likes to call "male cleavage." (His preferred fabric is Super 120's wool twill in "medium gray," a color that typically evokes the banal—pencil lead, gravel, wet cement.) The Thom Browne look has often been compared to Pee-wee Herman's archly nerdy costume or to Don Draper's office wear after a few rounds through the dryer, but it calls to my mind, too, some mischievous scamp out of a Roald Dahl book who is always conspiring to put a dead hamster in the headmistress's bed.

Browne, who is fifty-seven and launched his namesake ready-to-wear business twenty years ago, is hardly the first fashion designer to implement a dress code among employees—for decades, the Belgian designer Martin Margiela has required staff to wear long white coats, or *blouses blanches*, at all times—nor is he the first to take a schematic approach to dressing his customers. Chanel's little black dress was, as *Vogue* put it in 1926, a "uniform for all women of taste." But, in an industry known for chasing novelty, Browne has built one of the most influential brands by iterating on a single idea. His deceptively humble goal is, as he regularly tells his staff, "to make the gray suit look interesting." Once a menswear cult label, Thom Browne has in recent years become favored among celebrities who wish to signal that they're game for fashion risk-taking. In 2018—the same year the Italian textile juggernaut Zegna bought a majority stake in the brand, at a valuation of five hundred million dollars—LeBron James, a longtime fan, bought his Cleveland Cavaliers teammates matching Thom Browne suits to wear to playoff games. (The fashion critic Alexander Fury told me that Browne suits hold a special appeal among "big fucking straight men" who like the look of muscles bulging out of fine tailoring.) Browne has put the actor Oscar Isaac in a pleated skirt and the actress Christine Baranski in a corseted tuxedo. The members of boygenius, the queer-feminist supergroup, are currently channelling the early Beatles in custom Browne suits on their world tour. The musician Janelle Monáe, who identifies as nonbinary, attended this year's Met Gala in a Tim Burtonesque Thom Browne overcoat of black-and-white tweed that peeled off to reveal a giant sheer hoopskirt. Monáe told me, "In Thom's clothes I feel part of a species of people who are pushing culture forward."

For the couture show, Browne had rented the Palais Garnier, the city's grand nineteenth-century opera house. His team had shipped the collection from New York in refrigerator boxes. On Avenue Montaigne, preparations were taking place in a temporary atelier two floors above Browne's permanent showroom. Fifty employees sat hunched over high tables covered in white cloth, furiously making final adjustments. Some were embellishing a blazer with hundreds of sequins no bigger than a freckle. Others worked on a long overcoat of dove-gray wool interlaced with rows of silver beads, mimicking the undulating texture of silk moiré. Across a hallway, in a makeshift photo studio and fitting room, a photographer was shooting a male model in a shale-colored "bell" gown. One of a dozen such looks in the collection, it had exaggerated mutton sleeves and a conical skirt; a three-piece suit was inlaid down the center of the garment, giving the impression of one outfit skin-grafted onto another. Every now and then, a muffled tinkling sounded from one corner, where Anna Scott, Browne's head of footwear, futzed with pairs of stilettos that featured brass bells on the heels.

Whatever individuality the uniformed staffers transmitted emerged in small personal flourishes—a streak of pink hair, a glimpse of a leg tattoo—the way

Browne likes to say that he's devoted his career to making "the gray suit look interesting."





Above: Every Thom Browne piece includes an accent of red-white-and-blue grosgrain.
Right: A look from Spring 2020. Browne has been putting men in skirts for more than a decade.



a Catholic schoolgirl might radiate cool by adding safety pins to her pinafore. I'd worn shades of black and cream for my visit, but amid employees in uniform any color that wasn't gray seemed as obtrusive as flaming red. The British master milliner Stephen Jones, who makes headpieces for Browne's shows, noticed my baseball cap and asked, politely, if he might rid it of a smudge. Then he whisked it into another room to rub the brim down with a wet cloth.

Browne was standing in the middle of the fitting room, leaning against a marble table. He greeted me with a quick kiss on either cheek. Even in these surroundings, he stood out for the punctiliousness of his getup. He has a strong, square jaw and keeps his hair, now salt-and-pepper, in a tidy crewcut. He was wearing a tight sweater vest over his standard wrinkled oxford ("When everything is so well made, I think you need something that kind of throws it off a little bit so it's not so *precious*," he said of the wrinkles); on his muscular legs were snug wool shorts and a pair of Thom Browne knee socks. Browne's own approach to uniform is unvarying. A former swimmer, he runs eight miles a day; until a knee injury forced him to use a treadmill, he was known to jog around the Central Park reservoir in tailored shorts and a cashmere cardigan. Five years ago, he stopped wearing long pants altogether. He recalled that places like the Ritz in Paris and the Four Seasons in Milan used to give him a hard time for wearing shorts to dinner. "Now," he said, "they always let me in."

Browne's runway presentations are known for their narrative sophistication, but his references, he told me, are often "more Bugs Bunny than Proust." His settings are pulled from children's fables—an old-fashioned schoolhouse, an ice-skating rink, a pine forest filled with fake snow—often with a discomfiting twist. For his "Toy Story" collection, last year, he filled a room at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center with five hundred Steiff Teddy bears outfitted in his suits. A native of Allentown, Pennsylvania, Browne went to Catholic school until the seventh grade and served as an altar boy, and he has framed more than one collection around the theme of nuns and priests. For a show in 2012, he had his models emerge from coffins while a narrator told the audience that "they died for fashion." Johnson Hartig, one of Browne's oldest friends and the founder of the fashion label Libertine, told me that although there is "something draconian and a little dystopian" about Browne's creative vision, "it's all done in a tongue-in-cheek, innocent kind of way."

For the couture show, Browne had found inspiration in the opening lyrics of the song "Fade to Grey," by the British New Wave band Visage: "One man on a lonely platform." He described the show's protagonist, to be played by the Sudanese British supermodel Alek Wek, as "a girl who comes into a train station wearing a classic gray suit who is not so happy with her life." The rest of the collection featured outfits representing various characters that the woman encounters on the railway platform, including luggage porters, gargoyles, a conductor, and a pair of high-fashion pigeons.

One of the couture birds, played by a male model named Florian DesBiendras, wobbled in from the atelier in full costume, which included six-inch, heel-less cantilever shoes. Browne craned his neck. "God, you're so tall," he said, giggling.

For more than a decade, Browne has been in a relationship with Andrew Bolton, the head curator at the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute. When Browne was first developing the new collection, Bolton shared with him a time-honored rule of couture: garments should "look heavy and feel light." The pigeon outfit consisted of a fitted turtleneck minidress made of a paillette fabric developed for Browne in Switzerland, and covered with hundreds of hand-tipped gray, green, and purple feathers. In a witty touch, a hand-felted skirt made to resemble a suit jacket was draped around the hips, with exaggerated shoulder pads that doubled as panniers.

Browne asked DesBiendras, a trained dancer, to practice "walking like a bird." DesBiendras, who also had on a googly-eyed avian headpiece designed by Jones, began to strut around the room and flap his arms as if to mimic a dying swan. Joining in, Browne put his hands behind his back and wiggled his fingers like tail feathers.

Later, Browne went over the show's soundtrack with his music supervisor. Along with the Visage song, the playlist included gloomy tracks from Björk and David Bowie and a pair of arias from the opera "Dido and Aeneas." Browne likes to have his models walk slowly. Most fashion shows are under fifteen minutes; Browne's regularly go on for more than thirty. Critics sometimes complain about it, he said, "but I'm, like, you know what? I spent so



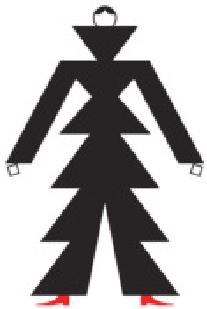
much on this. You're all gonna sit and enjoy it."

The music supervisor queued up the choo choo of a freight train, the clanging of an old-timey clock, and a chorus of pigeon coos. "Hey, I like to be cheesy sometimes," Browne said. He had imagined sprinkling the stage at the Palais Garnier with handmade felt pigeon droppings—"They would have to be embroidered by Lesage," Browne said, citing the legendary French needlework atelier—but had run out of time.

It was *goûter* hour in France. A publicist produced a spread that combined the glamorous and the mundane: a bottle of Dom Pérignon and a bag of plain potato chips. He poured the champagne into coupe glasses—Browne hates a flute—and the chips onto paper plates. Browne said that the idea for the combo had come from Marilyn Monroe's character in "The Seven Year Itch." "Chips *always* go with champagne," he added, reaching for a plate.

Every Thom Browne piece includes a red-white-and-blue striped grosgrain ribbon as an accent, whether it's a tab hanging off the back of a collar or a ring encircling a shirt arm. It is meant as a throwback to the cheap ribbon necklaces on the sports medals that Browne won in his competitive-swimming days. The fourth of seven siblings from a tight-knit Irish-Italian family, Browne would wake up on school days as early as 4 A.M. to train. His younger sister Jeanmarie Wolfe recalled, "We all held each other accountable and we were all competitive, but we knew that Thom just had *it*. We never worried about him. He always stayed the course." (Today Wolfe, a lawyer in Allentown, wears head-to-toe Thom Browne to work nearly every day.) Browne became an all-American swimmer as a teen, and was recruited to Notre Dame's Division I team. "I grew up in a Speedo," he recalled, when we met up in New York later in July, at Sant Ambroeus, an Italian café on Madison Avenue. "That regimen was always part of my day. I loved the organization of it, and the discipline." Browne is still a creature of habit. Since he and Bolton moved to Sutton Place, on the far East Side, in 2021, he has gone to Sant Ambroeus each morning to pick up his to-go breakfast—a sugar croissant and an espresso. That day, he'd agreed to dine in, at a red leather banquette. "This is new to me," he said. His order remained the same.

Browne's father, James, a lawyer and accountant, worked at a financial-services firm and wore Brooks Brothers suits to the office. His mother, Bernice, who'd met James in law school, stayed home with the kids and then, at fifty, passed the bar for a second time and went to work as a county solicitor. Browne thought he'd follow a traditional corporate path. He graduated from college with a business degree and took a consulting job in New York City, but he hated it and quit in less than a year. Not long afterward, a friend, the British interior designer Paul Fortune, offered to let Browne stay in the guesthouse at his Los Angeles home. Browne took him up on the offer, and ended up living in L.A. for six years.



Fortune, who died in 2020, was known for his high-profile clientele—Sofia Coppola, Marc Jacobs, Aileen Getty—and for his patrician sense of style. Like Browne, he was a gay man who'd gone to Catholic school. "He knew everybody," Browne recalled. "And he had excellent taste. He was inspiring just to be around, to see how you could make your own life." After two years, Browne moved into his own place, in Los Feliz. Many stories about Browne report that he spent his twenties as a "struggling actor," but he laughed when I brought this up. He briefly studied with a drama coach and appeared in a few television ads. But he mostly supported himself as a production assistant and script reader. The one souvenir of Browne's short-lived show-business career, he says, is his British-seeming name. Because there was already a Tom Browne in the Screen Actors Guild, he started going by Thom.

Since his year in the corporate world, Browne had gravitated toward wearing suits—Brooks Brothers, like his dad. But in L.A. he began to develop a more distinctive personal style. He would scour vintage stores for classic men's pieces and have them altered at a local dry cleaner, raising the leg hems and truncating the sleeves. When asked about the inspiration for the look, Browne has cited memories of John F. Kennedy's slender suits. But in reality J.F.K. often wore slouchy sack jackets and pants that broke over his shoelaces. The design "was this idea I had in my head, and I just had to get it out," Browne said. He told me that he enjoyed the way his too-small suits "drove people crazy," especially in laid-back L.A. He added, "I can't stand things that are very vanilla. I get bored by things that are just normal."

In 1997, he moved back to New York—"I had no money, and it was just scary," he told me—and, through a friend, landed a job as a sales assistant at Giorgio Armani's wholesale showroom. Armani had revamped power suits in the eighties with loose, billowy silhouettes, and though the aesthetic wasn't to Browne's personal taste, he quickly became a top salesman. Around the same time, he befriended the designer Ralph Lauren's chief of staff and eventually met Lauren, who was looking for a new designer to develop menswear for his mid-level work-wear brand Club Monaco. Despite Browne's lack of training, Lauren hired him for the job. Browne tried to bring his own ideas to the brand—miniature cardigans, high-water pants—but "it wasn't right for them," he recalled. "I couldn't give that stuff away. But I really loved it so much that I thought I should just be doing it myself."

Browne was not trained in sewing. To make suit prototypes for his own line, he needed to partner with an experienced tailor, but it was difficult to find one willing to use his bizarre specifications. After a stalled collaboration with a master tailor in Brooklyn, Browne connected with Rocco Ciccarelli, an old-school suit-maker in Queens, who agreed to make five sample suits (and went on to work as the head tailor for Browne until his retirement, in 2015). In 2001, at the age of thirty-five, Browne launched a made-to-measure business out of his one-bedroom apartment. He served as his own model, wearing the sample suits around town. He recalled that when he asked friends to purchase them "they were, like, 'Why would we









Previous spread: Employees in "uniform."
Left: A look from Spring 2020 features a starfish codpiece.
Above: A gown from Spring 2019 evokes a mermaid with beaded shells at the bodice.



A look from Fall 2022. Browne describes his creative reference points as "more Bugs Bunny than Proust."

want to buy something that doesn't even seem to fit *you*?'"

Innovation in tailored menswear has historically taken place in what one critic described to me as "infinitesimal adjustments." But by the turn of the millennium, with the rise in casual work wear, most men no longer had to buy a suit. The challenge was to make them *want* to buy one, and designers were trying out increasingly daring ideas. Raf Simons, at his eponymous label, and then Hedi Slimane, at Dior Homme, produced sleek black suits that gave their wearers the look of louche indie rockers. Tom Ford, during his tenure at Gucci, introduced high-waisted velvet suits in sultry jewel tones. Browne's tapered design drew on codes of American conformity—the trope of the "man in the gray flannel suit"—but also quite literally undercut them. The result was something impish and a little bit kinky: all that male cleavage, out on display. Within the fashion world, Browne was initially considered an intriguing artist on the fringes. "It was *so* small and *so* custom and *so* eccentric," the veteran British fashion critic Tim Blanks recalled. "If somebody had told me this would be a half-a-billion-dollar business in twenty years, I would have laughed."

Browne gained an important ally when a friend introduced him to Miki Higasa, a brand strategist who'd worked for Rei Kawakubo's avant-garde fashion house Comme des Garçons. Higasa had seen how a designer could make even the most challenging ideas legible to the public through repetition and persistence. She persuaded Browne to make a limited ready-to-wear collection in 2003, and soon afterward the operation moved into a small storefront in the meatpacking district. Higasa invited buyers to stop by, including Sarah Andelman, of the late trendsetting Paris boutique Colette, who placed an order for Browne's heavy oxford shirts and then, as she recalled, "had to keep reordering them." A buyer from Bergdorf Goodman agreed to carry the collection. "They wanted to put it on the tailoring floor, and not on the third floor with the fashion," Higasa recalled. "We said, 'This is not for the conventional guy.'"

In 2005, following Browne's first menswear runway show in New York City, David Bowie came into the store. He asked for a suit "exactly as I was wearing it, with no alterations," Browne recalled; Bowie later donned it during a televised concert at Radio City Music Hall. Browne's look has since filtered into the mainstream. The rows of high-water pants in any Gap store owe a debt to his work, as does J. Crew's ubiquitous slim-cut Ludlow suit. Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue* (and the global chief content officer of Condé Nast, the parent company of *The New Yorker*), works closely with Bolton as the co-chair of the Met Gala and counts the couple among her good friends. She told me, of the Browne silhouette, "Now we accept it as being absolutely part of the fashion vocabulary. He completely changed the way we see." One Browne staff member recalled that construction workers used to jeer at him when he walked down the street in his gray skirt. Today they just yell, "Hey, nice Thom Browne!"

One of Browne's publicists had given me an official invitation to the couture show, which was printed on card stock as thick as a Wasa cracker and included a small square insert bearing the

request "... Please wear your best grey." (Browne has a fondness for ellipses and prefers to spell "gray" the British way.) On the day of the event, the sky above the Palais Garnier's Beaux-Arts façade was a mottled, hazy apricot. Owing to the protests over the police shooting, armored guards stood around the building's perimeter. At the back entrance, I met one of Browne's lead publicists, Jonathon Zadrzynski—known as J.Z.—a skinny redhead wearing a full Thom Browne suit. I asked if he was roasting in the summer heat, and he shrugged. "We're used to it," he said.

Browne was inside in an airy rehearsal room with florid crown moldings and softly glowing globe lights. He stood quietly watching as two women added finishing touches to an ivory "gargoyle" gown that was hanging on a canvas dress form. There were two hours left until showtime.

"She wore gray!" Zadrzynski said to Browne, pointing to my outfit, a Rick Owens dress in a chalkboard hue.

"And I thank you for that," Browne said, flashing a smile. He walked over to another dress form to inspect a hulking trapezoidal blanket coat that his team had covered in ornate nautical embroidery—a sailboat, a lighthouse, conch shells, stalks of kelp. Sarah-Jane Wilde, a British American jewelry designer and former model, appeared suddenly from behind a rolling rack. "It's beautiful, Thom," she said. A close friend and collaborator of Browne's, Wilde was wearing a custom black seersucker Thom Browne minidress with a matching cape. With her long black hair and her eyes painted with kohl and gold shimmer, she looked like a dapper Cleopatra.

"I'm just here as a cheerleader," Wilde said to me. "Thom kind of lives in his own world, of his own making. I call it the champagne bubble." Glancing down at her outfit, she added, "That's why I'd *never* wear anything other than Thom. Why would you want to leave the bubble?"

Around the corner, in a hair-and-makeup room, the British makeup artist Isamaya Ffrench and her team were painting models' faces with splotches of neon eyeshadow, inspired by Visage's New Romantic eighties look—the only pops of color in the show. Jordan Roth, a Broadway theatre producer and real-estate heir who had been cast as the other pigeon, sat in front of a vanity, sipping bottled water, as a makeup artist glued down his eyebrows. "The first piece Thom ever sent me was this exquisite *sculpture*, with an hourglass shape and a codpiece," he said. "The hyper-masculinized and hyper-feminized aspects went straight to my heart." He swept one arm dramatically across the room. "It just makes sense that we are here now, because Thom is the *height* of operatic fashion."

Guests had started to arrive, and some made their way backstage. Maisie Williams, a twenty-six-year-old British actress who played Arya Stark on "Game of Thrones," carried an aquamarine Hector bag—one of Browne's most popular items, which is modelled on his eight-year-old dachshund of the same name and costs at least seventeen hundred dollars—and stroked it as if it were a real dog. Her outfit, a long pleated Wedgwood-blue skirt and boned corset, paired with a coördinating necktie, was the kind of thing a gentlewoman might once have worn to ride sidesaddle.

"I love the corset," Williams said, placing a hand on her stomach, "because it's, like, nobody knows I just had a really big sandwich."

Browne had been calm through the previous days' preparations, but as showtime drew nearer he seemed on edge. "Who is supposed to be watching you?" he asked a male model who was loitering out of formation in a bulky brocade jacket. He glanced at another model's latex thigh-highs, which were beginning to sag around the ankles. "Those don't look right," he said. Wilde put her hands on my shoulders and gently steered me toward the exit.

Browne showed in Europe for the first time in 2009, at the venerated Pitti Immagine Uomo menswear exhibition, in Florence. During his presentation, which took place in the auditorium of a military school, forty men, all wearing cropped gray trousers and khaki trenchcoats and carrying black briefcases, walked out in single file and stood next to forty identical mid-century desks. A "boss" at the front of the room rang a bell, and the men sat down and began typing cacophonously on vintage Olivettis, calling to mind the opening scene of Billy Wilder's "The Apartment." After several minutes, the men got up and each placed a red apple on the boss's desk.

Such imagery has led some observers to interpret Browne's collections as comments on American masculinity. Was Browne turning men into boys? Was he mocking the white-collar worker by making him look cramped in a suit he's on the verge of outgrowing? The fashion critic Cathy Horyn, writing about another of Browne's early runway shows, called him the "anti Ralph Lauren," suggesting that whereas Lauren's vision of American life was expansive—Gatsbyesque gents in a classic roadster, a couple on a gleaming catamaran—Browne "seems to see a culture shrinking to the point of implosion."

Browne told me that he struggled, at first, to find a "balance between the conceptual and the commercial." Menswear has experienced an "unprecedented boom" in recent years, according to Business of Fashion, an industry Web site. But by some estimates it constitutes only around thirty per cent of fashion-industry revenue. Menswear designers who want to expand their customer base—and who don't want to work for a legacy fashion house—often move into women's wear, accessories, fragrances, and other categories that make up a so-called life-style brand. Browne got a foothold in fashion's mainstream by collaborating with blue-blooded heritage labels. For five years, beginning in 2007, he designed a capsule collection at Brooks Brothers, called "Black Fleece." The collection's suits, at around twenty-five hundred dollars, were almost double the price of the company's traditional suits (and about half the price of those made under Browne's own label). In 2009, Browne also designed a collection for the ski outfitter Moncler, featuring lapelled puffer coats and beanies in red, white, and blue. But in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis Browne's business almost collapsed, and he pivoted toward more traditional paths to financial stability. In 2011, with an investment from a Japanese wholesale distribution company, he launched his first women's line, with plaid skirt suits and grosgrain-trimmed capelets. His company now operates more than a hundred retail stores around the world.

Browne told me that he "hates trends," but the ascendancy of his brand coincided

with a revived interest in preppy style, spurred in part by the popularity of the TV shows "Gossip Girl" and "Mad Men." Starting in the two-thousands, Polo Ralph Lauren and Lacoste saw a surge in sales, and J. Crew experienced a revitalization under the leadership of the designer Jenna Lyons (who wore Thom Browne to this year's Kentucky Derby). Like those brands, Thom Browne cannily drew upon the iconography of Ivy League style. From the beginning, as a nod to vintage varsity sweaters, Browne adorned many of his pieces with a trio of white stripes. When, in 2008, the sportswear giant Adidas sent him a cease-and-desist letter, accusing him of stealing its three-banded logo, Browne simply added a fourth stripe. (The problem seemed resolved until he launched a line of eight-hundred-dollar sweatpants and hoodies. Adidas sued for copyright infringement, in 2021, and lost a trial earlier this year. Browne made the news for wearing shorts every day to court.)

Many wealthy consumers today have embraced "quiet luxury"; it is considered déclassé to use visible branding to prove that you paid thousands for your cashmere slacks. Thom Browne is as pricey as such understated brands as Loro Piana or Brunello Cucinelli, but Browne's designs are relatively aggressive about calling attention to themselves. Lauren Sherman, a fashion-industry correspondent for the media outlet Puck, told me that Browne's signatures have become as recognizable as the logos of far more profitable brands. "You know instantly when someone is wearing Thom Browne," she said. The gray suit was once the ultimate cloak of anonymity. Browne has turned it into a badge of conspicuous consumption.

The couture show involved a clever bait and switch: guests were funnelled through the back door of the Palais Garnier and, unbeknownst to them, onto the main opera-house stage. The red velvet proscenium curtain was lowered. A large gray bell made of tulle and wrapped in red-white-and-blue grosgrain hung from the rafters, and several dozen felt pigeons were scattered around the felt-covered floor. On each seat lay a cigarette-size paper scroll, like the message a carrier pigeon might deliver, bearing the line "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush . . ."

The actress Diane Keaton was seated in the front row, wearing a pale-gray Thom Browne three-piece with a matching bowler hat. (Later, in an e-mail, Keaton called the show "astonishing," adding, "You know me, I love a man's suit.") Emma Chamberlain, a Gen Z influencer, stood nearby in an écru Thom Browne laced corset, which she described as "not exactly comfortable." She confessed that she was dying to take one of the stuffed birds home. "Pigeons are my favorite animal," she said. "And rats."

A few feet away, in a navy Thom Browne sheath dress, was the twenty-seven-year-old actress Ayo Edebiri, a star of the hit TV series "The Bear." The show's creator, Christopher Storer, is a Browne devotee, and last season Edebiri's character, a professional cook, received a one-of-a-kind Thom Browne chef's jacket as a gift. Edebiri had told Browne how breathable it was underneath the hot lights of the set. "He thought that was really funny, because he was, like, 'I'm not so known for making things that are functional,'" she recalled. (After the episode aired, Browne was flooded with requests for kitchen gear. "We're holding out for Jean-Georges," he quipped.)

The show was supposed to begin at five, but at twenty past guests were still milling about. A woman in uniform explained, "We're waiting for Cardi B. I guess she's stuck in traffic." A few minutes later, Cardi made her entrance, wearing a tweed dress in a wiggle style and a foot-high gold filigree headdress. Soon the house lights dimmed. A swelling string overture played from the speakers, followed by a sound effect of thunderous applause. Then the curtain at the front of the room rose to reveal the two thousand red velvet seats of the opera house, each occupied by a cardboard cutout of a figure wearing sunglasses and a Thom Browne suit. The sea of deadpan faces was both spooky and hilarious—what better way to deliver a packed house than to print one? Audience members gasped and then began to applaud along with the soundtrack. Wintour told me later that she considered the stunt, which cost nearly a hundred thousand dollars, to be "one of the largest storytelling moments in Paris."

During the next thirty minutes, more than fifty looks paraded down the runway. Alek Wek emerged first, wearing a plain Thom Browne suit and a head scarf. She sat onstage, on a piece of luggage, and remained there for the rest of the presentation, making eye contact with each model passing by. The collection was a kind of self-retrospective, but with Browne's usual motifs carried to elaborate extremes. A series of coats had a plaid pattern—a Browne staple—that was made not with preprinted fabric but by crisscrossing colored threads through tiny glass beads. His typically kitschy nautical themes were pushed into riskier, more grotesque territory. One striped blazer featured a puffy golden lobster whose embroidered claws came up over the shoulders, as if it were trying to drag the model underwater. Browne had strayed from his monochrome palette in previous collections—his 2022 styles included sumptuous evening jackets in mustard, lavender, emerald, and cantaloupe—but his couture looks were nearly all in shades of gray. The effect was to attune the eye to subtle contrasts—the way a gown juxtaposed shiny pewter satin with matte taffeta in a similar hue, or a pair of sequinned ombré trousers changed from charcoal at the hip to faintly ashen at the hem.

Couture shows traditionally end with the designer's take on a wedding gown. Browne's bride, the supermodel Grace Elizabeth, doubled as the train coming into the station. She glided down the center aisle, wearing a beaded, sheer white garment that looked like a tuxedo jacket whose hem was melting to the floor. Two men in swim caps carried the train of the dress. From far away, the piece shimmered as if made of shaved ice. Browne told me later that his team had worked eighteen-hour shifts for three straight weeks to finish it on time. In one hand, Elizabeth carried a large leather clutch in the shape of a steam locomotive. It was as if Browne were daring an overcooked gag—a train on

Right: A "gargoyle" gown from Browne's couture collection features cascading layers of taffeta and satin.
Next spread: Browne's signature "shrunken" suit draws on codes of American conformity but makes the wearer stand out.







a train on a train—to detract from the sombre mood of the proceedings. The fashion critic Amy Fine Collins told me afterward, "There are always moments in Thom's shows where you have to laugh. And typically you *never* laugh at a fashion show." (Browne told me that, beneath the gown, Elizabeth was wearing a pair of panties decorated with a bejewelled crab. "The joke is self-explanatory," he said.)

Some designers are interested in exalting the person wearing their creations. The late Alber Elbaz, who made elegantly draped women's gowns for Lanvin, said, "I'm not trying to transform anyone, I'm just trying to make everyone, as much as I can, a better version of themselves." Browne, by contrast, has been criticized for his punishing demands on models—the impossibly high shoes, the agonizingly slow processions under heavy layers of wool. In the past, he has obscured models' faces or tied their hands behind their backs. Browne told me, "Sometimes I like it when my clothes negate the person. Not because I don't respect the guy or girl wearing them. I do. But I really want to see a fully fleshed-out idea."

The morning after the show, Browne was back in his showroom on Avenue Montaigne to receive private clients. Compared with the lively makeshift atelier upstairs, the space was hushed and austere. Stepping off the elevator, guests were greeted with the scent of a single Thom Browne vetiver candle sitting on a teak desk. When I entered the display area, where the couture pieces had been artfully arranged on mannequins and rolling racks, an employee asked me if I wouldn't mind placing my handbag (gray, but not Thom Browne) in the back room.

A man whom one employee called the brand's "biggest client in Mexico" came through, wearing a suit printed with a "Moby-Dick"-inspired toile, from the new fall ready-to-wear collection. Sharon Coplan Hurowitz, an art adviser and New York socialite, was there in jodhpurs, but the night before her ensemble had been more "Alice in Wonderland," including a tilted-teacup headpiece by Jones balanced precariously atop her head.

Marisa Hunt, one of Browne's "client-relations managers," arrived with Chris Sunahara, a thirtysomething Google executive and self-professed "Thom Browne obsessive" who was wearing a gray Browne suit with added tuxedo tails. Sunahara told me that he discovered Browne's suits after losing a significant amount of weight and feeling liberated to try new ways of dressing. "I remember thinking, O.K., this stuff is expensive, maybe I'll buy a T-shirt," he said. But the completeness of Browne's uniform can serve as a potent sales tactic. Doing it halfway would be more unfashionable than not doing it at all. "You have to have the shoes and the suit and the glasses—everything down to your feet," Sunahara said. "That's how they get you." In less than a year, he had bought more than sixty pieces.

"Listen, as a gay male, you *dream* of fashion, and I could never fit in this stuff," he said, his voice growing shaky. "When you wear Thom Browne, you get so much attention, and it's kind of nice to give that energy when you walk down the street."

"That is making me feel all the feels," Hunt said, handing Sunahara a coupe glass of champagne.

Sunahara approached an ivory gown that Browne had described to me as his "mermaid sashimi dress," featuring metallic breasts and scales on the front and a jagged golden fish skeleton running down the back. I learned later that it was priced at sixty thousand dollars.

"Oh, my God," Sunahara said, passing his hand over the brocade. He asked if Browne might consider making a version for him with a six-pack instead of breasts. "Like a mer*man*," he added.

He left the showroom empty-handed, but the next day he returned to order a new made-to-measure Thom Browne suit.

Despite living with an eminent fashion historian, Browne is not steeped in fashion history, and prefers it that way. He doesn't make mood boards for his collections, choosing instead to transmit his vision to his team through conversation. "Andrew approaches things very intellectually," Browne told me. "I'm more just instinctual." At one point, remarking on the use of lobster imagery in his designs, I brought up Elsa Schiaparelli's famous 1937 lobster dinner dress. "I wish I didn't know about that," Browne said, adding that he finds it "crippling" to be aware of what other designers have done.

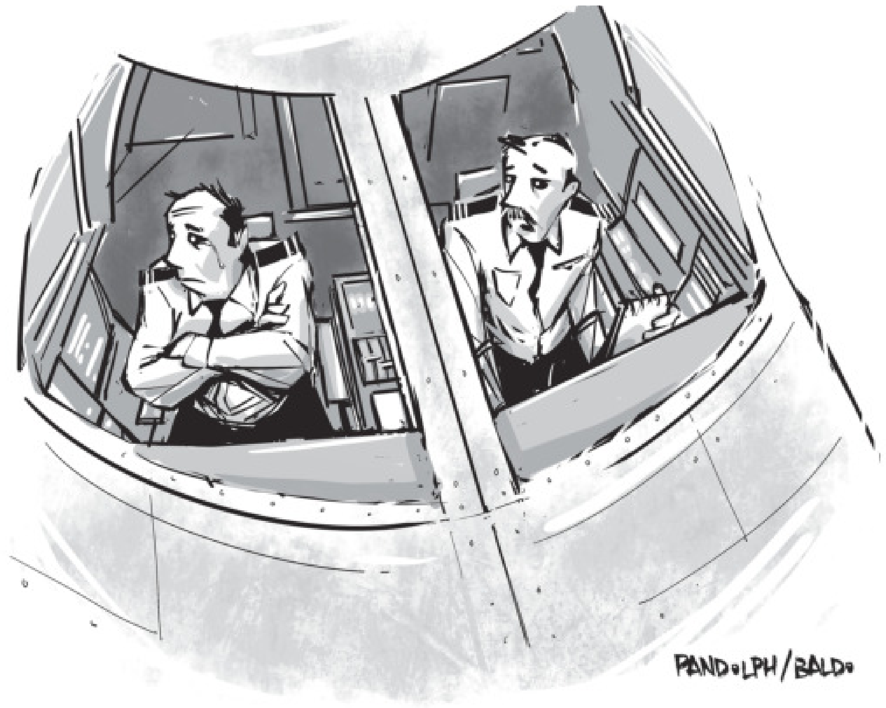
Some critics have tried to dissect Browne's work in relation to his biography—his thigh-baring shorts as a queer statement, for example—but he resists such connections. "I love gay men, and straight men, and gay women, and straight women," he told me. He tries to stay away from political debates as well. He dressed Michelle Obama for the 2013 Presidential Inauguration and said in 2018 that he would be equally open to working with Melania Trump. When I asked him about this comment, which provoked consternation at the time, he replied, "What I said was that I respect the office of the First Lady. I would hope most people are proud to be American."

Browne's reticence can seem at odds with his growing public role in American fashion. Last January, he replaced Tom Ford as the chairman of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, the trade organization that represents four hundred U.S. designers and oversees New York Fashion Week. When he first assumed his C.F.D.A. position, he sent out a note to his fellow-designers saying that although he supported their endeavors "in spirit," he would not be attending any of their shows in person that season—he would be busy "challenging myself to create something memorable."

One afternoon in August, I visited Browne and Bolton at their home, a Georgian-style mansion that was built a century ago for the heiress Anne Harriman Vanderbilt. I was greeted at the entrance by Browne and a fusillade of high-pitched barking from Hector, who was bounding around Browne's feet. The dog, who has his own Instagram account and often wears a miniature Thom Browne sweater, might be the most famous pet-muse in fashion since Karl Lagerfeld's cat Choupette.

"He's a real *schweetie*," Browne said, scooping him up and giving him a scratch on the chin.

Browne and Bolton's taste in décor is a mix of the ornate and the severe. When they renovated, they painted the bright-blue front door black. The foyer features a black-and-white marble checkerboard floor and a large bronze cupid sculpture by Augustus Saint-Gaudens.



"Hey, it's O.K., Frank. I'm sure they'll applaud for your next landing."

In the dimly lit dining room, paintings of Jesus and four decorative urns created the atmosphere of a rectory.

We went out onto the back terrace, which overlooked an enormous lawn stretching down to the East River. From this angle, the water looked like a private lido. A publicist brought out several chilled mini-bottles of Perrier and crystal goblets engraved with the logo of the Ritz Paris.

Bolton, a native of Lancashire, England, is pale and trim, with floppy gray hair and angular cheekbones. His outfit had an air of après-tennis: a gray-and-white striped Thom Browne T-shirt with Browne sneakers and socks. As he sat down next to Browne, he noted, a bit sheepishly, that his shorts were Ralph Lauren. "I would say ninety per cent of my wardrobe is Thom," Bolton said.

"Hey, I like the shorts," Browne said. "I do think Andrew has good style. We reference it so often in the office—'How would Andrew wear it?'"

Browne and Bolton first met at a fashion conference in 2005, but Bolton told me that he had been aware of Browne's work for some time before. "I was in London working on a project with Savile Row tailors, and I remember them being completely up in arms about him," Bolton said. "I suppose the first I heard of Thom was as a travesty to tailoring." He went on, "You know, I think that was sort of a homophobia, because at first it was so associated with fashionable gay men wearing this particular suit. Maybe it still is."

Like Browne, Bolton grew up middle class and had no education in fashion. He studied anthropology at the University of East Anglia and curated East Asian art at the Victoria & Albert Museum before arriving at the Met, two decades ago. More than one person I spoke to referred to Bolton and Browne as American fashion's reigning power couple, and it's clear that their positions reinforce each other; the Met Costume Institute's 2021 exhibition "In America: A Lexicon of Fashion," curated by Bolton, included two Thom Browne suits in a pantheon of looks that have defined a national style. But the men told me that they still see themselves as industry outsiders and that their friends, for the most part, "are not fashion people." They attend the Met Gala every year, but when I asked whom they like to entertain at home Bolton let out a small laugh. "No one," he said. He recalled that when Wintour first came over she said, "Why did you buy such a pretentious house? You never have anybody over. It's just going to be you and Thom rattling around." In their free time, the pair like to order in and watch old movies. (Neither likes to cook.)

Many critics have seemed pessimistic lately about the state of the American fashion industry. Whereas New York was once a hub of global fashion—particularly in the eighties and nineties, when designers like Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, Oscar de la Renta, and Calvin Klein were all showing in Manhattan—the industry's center of gravity has since shifted to Europe. The Row, New York's quintessential quiet-luxury brand, recently moved its production operations to Italy. Perhaps the buzziest show of the year, the American musician Pharrell Williams's début as the men's creative director for Louis Vuitton, took place on the Pont Neuf, in Paris. The U.S. ecosystem "has taken a bit of a walloping," Tim Blanks, the fashion critic, told me, adding, "When Thom first arrived on the scene, there was a real sense of dynamism, and I haven't felt that in some time."

Browne said that his goal with the C.F.D.A. was to guide young American designers toward thinking about "longevity," as opposed to following flash-in-the-pan trends or the tides of social media. "The most important thing I can do is just lead by example," he said, adding, "I didn't know how to sustain this business at the beginning, but then I did. And no one can really help you but yourself."

The two men showed me a forthcoming coffee-table book on Browne's work, edited by Bolton. He had spent a year pulling hundreds of looks from Browne's archive, and had written an introductory essay about the history of the color gray.

"Andrew selected everything," Browne said. "He said to me once, which I think is very true, that designers are the worst at curating their own work."

He got up from the table, prompting Hector, who had been snoozing underfoot, to bolt upright.

"Want to go out and bark, Hecky?" Browne said, moving toward the back door. "He's horribly trained."

"He *can* be very friendly," Bolton said. "When we are on the street, he always runs up to men in gray suits." ♦

PROFILES

OUTSIDE MAN

Jeremy O. Harris, before and after "Slave Play."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

When the first coronavirus lockdowns went into effect, and the global mood was a moan of quiet agitation and fear, the playwright Jeremy O. Harris was living in a two-story apartment in London. He had travelled there for a production of his play "Daddy," about a young Black artist who has fallen under the thrall of an older white man. "Daddy" had débuted, Off Broadway, a year before, and was set to open at the Almeida Theatre at the end of March, 2020; it would have been Harris's first professional opening overseas. But the show didn't open, and Harris stayed stranded in London for weeks, then, eventually, for months.

Sad about the play and scared about the world, he passed the first few weeks not writing—although many deadlines, constant companions in his life, hovered at the peripheries of his mind. Since high school, Harris has used the late night and earliest morning as a time to work and party and talk about art with friends; now he binged anime and listened to Fiona Apple and started reading Audre Lorde's "Sister Outsider," which he'd always meant to get to. As the weeks wore on, he tired of his vampirism. "I decided that I wanted to see the sun more often," he said one April morning, as streams of light made bright rectangles on the apartment walls. Waking up at normal hours meant dealing with pedestrian annoyances. He'd begun ordering coffee from a nearby café, and twice in a row, although he ordered it black, it was delivered with milk. "It's, like, everyone's watching 'The Plot Against America,'" he said, referring to the HBO miniseries based on the novel by Philip Roth, "and this feels very much like 'The Plot Against Jeremy.'"

Harris is very tall and very thin, and handles his body with improvised precision, formality within informality, like a dancer on an off day at the mall. A gesture begun in his shoulder always ends at the tips of his fingers. When he gropes for thoughts between sentences, he makes shapes in the air with his hands. He has clear cedar skin and a pert, wide mouth. His eyes are sedate and low-lidded when he's in a neutral mood, but they open wide when he tells a story or expresses an urgent (often dissenting) opinion. Stories sometimes incite him to stand up and pantomime crucial passages of action. His first dream, before writing, was to act.

When the third coffee came, finally correct, he sat on a couch by a window and lit a cigarette. Lots of people he knew were smoking again, he said, despite the worldwide march of a deadly respiratory disease: "Our lungs could fail us at any moment, and we're just, like, you know, fuck it."

Coffee and an American Spirit, white light through the window—his instinct about waking with the sun had been borne out. The apartment was pleasant in the daytime. On one wall was a large abstract painting in russets and burgundies and bright lipstick shades. Upstairs was a bedroom that he shared with his newish boyfriend, Arvand Khosravi, a film and television executive. At the top of the staircase was a glass door leading out to a shallow ledge on the roof, where Harris often went to film TikTok videos—mostly poppy, fast-paced riffs on scenes from classic plays—which he had been posting almost daily. In one, titled "Titus Andronicus Act V," he lip-synchs dialogue from the TV show "Catfish," in four different costumes; it's nine seconds long.

Harris did the TikToks for fun; they were, for weeks, his sole avenue of creative expression. But they were also, not so subtly, a dig at the profession through which he had gained his recent fame. Rooted in the history and the canonical repertoire of theatre, but yoked dramaturgically to hyper-current rhythms and attitudes and styles, the TikToks showed that Harris could do what the big arts institutions couldn't—keep up. While they floundered, he figured, the show would go on from his phone. He had changed the bio on his frequently updated Twitter account to a kind of epitaph for the theatre: "I spent my 20s devoted to a craft in a coma."

Stages everywhere were dark; theatre companies and nonprofits were scrambling. In both their public statements and their private conversations with playwrights, they projected blithe optimism, as though their operations would be up and running by summer's end.

"Like, no, guys!" Harris said, describing his frustration. "We have to reinvent this or re-create this, or else it's going to be even more detrimental to artists in six months, when you guys have wasted your resources trying to go the normal way." "Daddy" was still in British limbo, and he had another play, "A Boy's Company Presents: 'Tell Me If I'm Hurting You'"—his version of a Jacobean revenge drama, based on a particularly bad breakup—scheduled to début in May, at Playwrights Horizons, in New York. Nobody would officially admit—or, perhaps, allow themselves to believe—that the upcoming seasons wouldn't happen, but Harris was already mourning the new play, just as he was mourning "Daddy."

His ire notwithstanding, thinking and talking about the failures of his industry seemed to energize him—almost to soothe him—and his online complaints soon came to echo a wider mood. As the initial shock of the pandemic gave way to a reëvaluation of racial and other societal arrangements, Harris became a kind of spokesman for the long-standing and suddenly stark unrest felt by his fellow-artists. It was a moment well suited to Harris's natural, if somewhat paradoxical, penchant for institutional critique. A happy disrupter of genteel silences, he has nonetheless, however rockily, charted a professional and personal path through some of the entertainment world's most staid establishment outposts: the Yale School of Drama; Gucci, for which he does modelling; various



"It's easier for me to write when I'm writing from a place of, like, 'These people don't believe in me enough,'" Harris said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY REMI FERRANTE HARTMAN

Hollywood-adjacent neighborhoods in Los Angeles; and now, most visibly, the Great White Way. The previous fall, "Slave Play," the first of Harris's works to be staged in New York, had transferred to the Golden Theatre, on Broadway, after an extended run at the venerable New York Theatre Workshop, downtown.

"Slave Play" tells the story of three interracial couples undergoing "antebellum sexual-performance therapy," in order, presumably, to mend the edges of their relationships, which have been frayed by race. In the first act, before the audience is in on the premise, the couples—dressed in nineteenth-century garb, as masters and slaves—engage in various kinky sexual scenarios calibrated to set off trip wires in race- and sex-sensitive American minds. The second act, in which the actual therapy takes place, is straightforwardly funny. The third is a surreal, largely horrifying duet between one of the couples, a Black woman and her white husband. Over and over, "Slave Play" calls into question the true parameters of sexual consent and tries to wring current-day catharsis from the brutal history of master-slave rape.

In some corners—including this magazine, in a review that I wrote—Harris was lauded for the wild rigor of his vision and the originality of his voice. And the play's overwhelming success was the precondition for many of the luxuries he now enjoyed: the London flat, the European engagement, a two-year development deal that he had recently signed with HBO. At the same time, "Slave Play" was a kind of troll job, perversely aimed at unsettling and possibly enraging the various constituencies—racial, sexual, institutional, professional—to which he belonged. Harris must have known that the play would have this effect; he seemed to revel in the discursive mess it left in its wake. Even before the pandemic, he had earned a reputation as an enfant terrible, the kind of designation that is made possible only by way of proximity. You've got to be fairly close to the big house to even consider throwing stones.

"Something I've always wondered is when I'm going to develop the affected-Black-intellectual voice," Harris said that summer, still stuck in London. He was reflecting on some of his favorite writers and artists of an older generation, and the way that their talk was often as effortfully stylized as their work. He'd been thinking about André Leon Talley, the fashion writer and editor whose high diction and baroque syntax became hallmarks of his style—and seemed, moreover, like a way of asserting his belonging in a largely white milieu. Talley, who died last year, was, like Harris, a tall, queer, highly verbal Black man from the South. His web of complex, sometimes tortured relationships with white co-workers, bosses, and benefactors was consonant with—and had possibly even influenced—the dynamics depicted in "Slave Play." Harris is unabashed in his study of other artists' personas. "I'm so interested in personal style, and personal relationships, and class—if not class ascension, then class association," he said. "Just the lilt of certain people."

Talk of that voice—I knew what Harris meant without having to ask—got me thinking, perhaps slightly defensively, of my own.

"You have it a little bit," he said, confirming a fear I'd spoken aloud.

We agreed, though, that the voice of our rough age cohort—Harris is thirty-four—was particular. The sort of Black Millennial writer whom Harris had in mind was not someone who would deploy the suavely concatenated sentences of James Baldwin. Rather, this hypothetical thirtysomething, as eager to showcase pop-cultural with-it-ness and egalitarian humility as to display hard-won verbal acuity, would use locutions peppered with pointed "like"s and "um"s, plus a bit of vocal fry, for subtler tones of falsely self-deprecating color: a Valley Girl with an advanced degree.

"I one hundred per cent know that I have a Valley Girl accent because of 'Clueless,'" Harris said. "But also, partially, I think unconsciously, I did it so that my intellect wouldn't be intimidating to everyone around me. This is a part of my plays that was also a part of growing up—I've always had to figure out how to translate stuff from the academy into language that my mom could understand, without asking her to take time from her life to read, like, Saidiya Hartman." A dramaturgical note for "Slave Play" quoted both Hartman and Hortense Spillers, another Black feminist scholar, but the play itself takes Rihanna as its primary muse. "I had to bring my learning into a different space of understanding, which is why it's so much more fun for me to write plays that are based in theory than it is for me to go, 'And then Jonathan wanted to get a divorce from Becca,' or things like that."

Harris speaks in a restless tenor, alternating locomotive bursts with considered pauses; his voice is bright and brackish and warm. He talks about movies and plays and clothes and people's bodies constantly. His sentences often start with "Have you seen?" or "Have you read?" Unless he already knows, from your work—almost all his friends are artists or public people of one kind or another—that you've seen it or read it, and what you think about it, and is prepared to gently argue. He says "yes," encouragingly but without much emphasis, when he hears something he agrees with, never "yeah." Two words he uses a lot are "ostensibly" and "psychotic."

Harris was raised in Martinsville, Virginia, among people who made their livings with their bodies, many of them in factories. His way with words marked him as different. His mother, Veronica Farrish, refused to let family members use baby talk with him. He taught himself to read, and was soon the kind of prematurely unimpressed kid who finds it easier to make friends with teachers than with classmates. When Harris was eight, one of his favorite pastimes, he said, was trading theories with his mother about what had happened to JonBenét Ramsey, the six-year-old pageant contestant whose murder was a tabloid bonanza in the late nineties: "I was, like, 'O.K., I looked at this document.'"

His early interest in true crime briefly convinced him that he wanted to be a lawyer—that standby aspiration for the precociously talkative. But after landing a part in his middle school's production of "My Fair Lady," he realized that he possibly just wanted to play a lawyer on TV. Around the same time, Harris was realizing that he was gay, or at least different—this difference was the rare condition for which he didn't yet have the words. Another discomfort was the unsettled nature of his home life. He didn't meet his biological father until he was nine or ten; his mother married another man when Harris was four, got divorced when Harris was in middle school, then embarked on another short-lived mar-

riage, to a military man stationed at what was then Fort Bragg, in North Carolina. Harris moved there with his mother and enrolled in a new school. "I was so upset," he said.

Harris spent much of his childhood in private Christian schools, helped by financial aid. As a result, he became comfortable with the discombobulating tension of being a poor Black kid in a largely rich, white environment. Then, in tenth grade, he got a scholarship to Carlisle, a prep school in Martinsville. In the hallways, there were pictures of each graduating class. As Harris recalls, Black faces didn't begin showing up in the photographs until the mid-nineties, when the school started a basketball team. "Everybody wanted me to play basketball," Harris said. "And I was, like, No. I hated that so much. I was, like, I will *never* do that." Instead, he took up swimming and dance. He kept up his practice of befriending teachers. "Candace—and Paula, who taught in the middle school," he recalled, "I would have coffee with them after school, and they were my friends."

By this point, Harris was determined to be an actor. He got parts in plays and musicals and directed a production of "The Laramie Project," Moisés Kaufman's documentary play about the aftermath of the killing of Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming. His kaffeeklatsch pal Candace Owen-Williams, who taught drama at Carlisle, let him turn an empty trailer behind the school into a black-box theatre, where he and some other friends put on experimental shows. His senior thesis was a one-man production of Wallace Shawn's "The Fever."

For college, Harris went to the acting conservatory at DePaul University, in Chicago. The program's structure was brutal: after freshman year, only half of the students were allowed to continue with the acting cohort; the others were cut, and had to pursue different fields of study if they wished to remain at the school. Harris found the first year—essentially a protracted audition—disorienting. "A lot of my teachers said that my intellect was going to get in the way of me being a real actor," he said. "I always sort of directed or rewrote the circumstances of the scene to fit the emotional states that I wanted to play around in, to make it more interesting to me." Part of the problem, he said, was that so many of the roles and scenes were geared toward white actors. But he internalized the message that "if you're smart, you have to hide it," he said. "I still stand by all my choices," he added, "because, in some ways, I made cooler theatre then than I'm making now." For an exercise in "autodrama," he put twenty lamps of different shapes and sizes onstage. The lamps were the only source of light in the show; each one represented a story connected to a father figure. Then, as now, Harris was seeking, and sometimes finding, masked ways to describe the absence left by his actual father. In the glow of each light, he told a version of a memory.

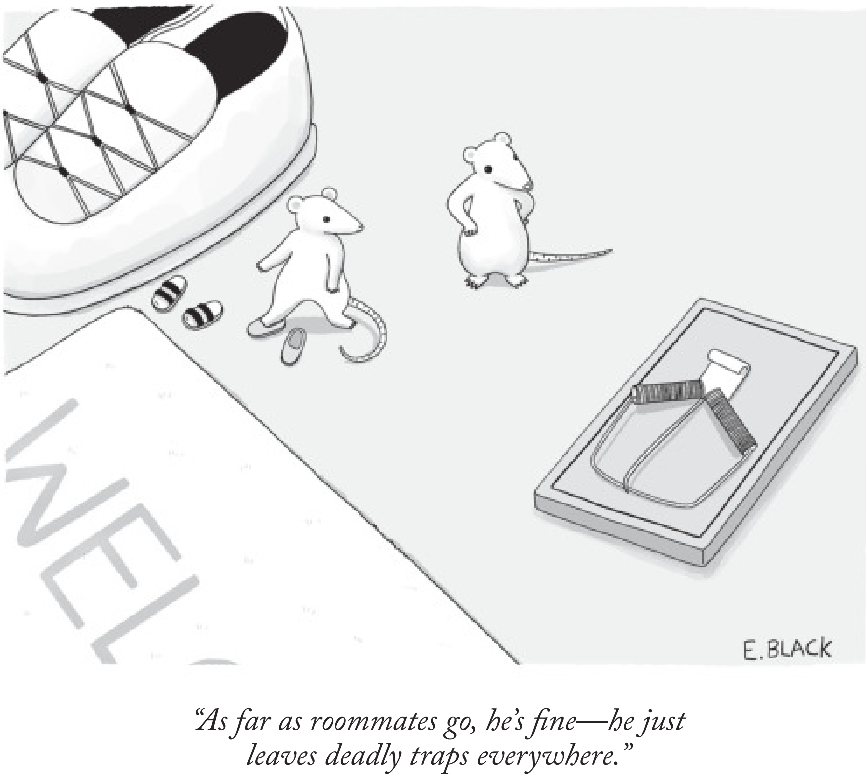
After the first semester, Harris chopped his long hair, nervous about how his teachers might perceive him. When the program made its cuts, the following summer, he called his friend and classmate Erika J. Simpson. Neither had got in. They were quiet for a long time.

It was June—a beautiful month in Chicago but, for Harris, who had just turned nineteen, the grim beginning of an uncertain period. He called one of his teachers to ask why he'd been dismissed; she said that he wouldn't be "castable" as an actor until his thirties, and rattled off a list of reasons that felt, to him, like "gay-coded shit." He told me, "There were four Black boys in our year, and the two that got cut were the ones that felt the femme-est."

He started collecting issues of the Chicago *Reader*, a free alternative newspaper whose pages he trawled for acting notices. At an audition, he broke down, crying and trembling. He explained himself to the producers—some of them had gone to DePaul; they understood—and they told him that he could step out of the room for a moment, compose himself, and try again. Instead, he just left.

Eventually, Harris got modest parts at small venues in the city. He became an English major, and briefly imagined writing poems. He was interested in the work of Ai, a mixed-race woman from Arizona whose poor upbringing reminded Harris of his own. In her poems, Ai, who died in 2010, inhabited the voices of tough, sly, vulnerable working-class people asserting their dignity—or, at least, some measure of hip and artful defiance—against the backdrop of an indifferent and often hostile world. "You say you want this story / in my own words, / but you won't tell it my way," her poem "Interview with a Policeman," from 1987, begins. Her work would come to influence Harris's understanding of the possibilities of monologue.

But Harris didn't remain an English



"As far as roommates go, he's fine—he just leaves deadly traps everywhere."

major, or a DePaul student, for long. He dropped out and, a year later, moved to Los Angeles.

By the end of the first pandemic summer, Harris and Khosravi had left the London apartment and were driving around Europe in a car full of their stuff. Khosravi had felt too cooped up in their flat, but Harris refused to move back to the U.S. "This is why it's hell to date me," he said. The pair were in Naples, Italy, in mid-October, when Tony nominations were announced, on a live stream. It was evening in Italy; Harris got on FaceTime with his mom, nieces, and nephew, so that he could watch it with them. He had to hop off about four nominations in because the stream that his mom was watching was ahead of his, and she kept screaming before he'd seen the news. In the end, "Slave Play" got twelve nominations, more than any non-musical production had before.

"Slave Play" was a genuinely difficult piece of work, a deliberate provocation. At one post-show Q.&A., a white woman yelled at Harris that she didn't "want to hear that white people are the fucking problem all the time." Some Black audience members insisted that the play was oriented toward a "white gaze," and was a cynical exploitation of the intertwined subjects of slavery and rape. Both currents of backlash were more or less predictable. The dozen nominations seemed to indicate that Harris could start a food fight in the theatre world's living room and still be invited to sit at its dinner table.

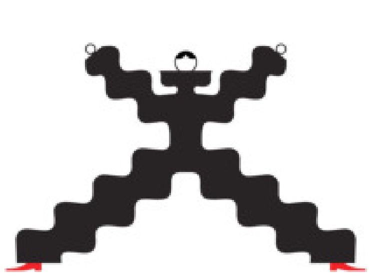
"It emboldens me to be more forthright with my opinions and how I feel about the world, because, if I gave a fuck about what institutions were actually saying to me, the 'Slave Play' that got twelve nominations would not be the 'Slave Play' that got twelve nominations," he said. "It would have been a dumber play, and a less complex play, and a less Jeremy play."

But this institutional approbation also posed a kind of creative challenge. "I think the thing that I'm trying to get over—and I've been working on this a lot over the last year—is other people's excitement about me," Harris said. "It's easier for me to write when I'm writing from a place of, like, 'These people don't believe in me enough.' When I have something to prove, I can write so much better."

Since his time in L.A., if not before, Harris had defined himself in opposition to those around him—or, at least, those with power. He had initially made his way not in professional settings but in the more free-flowing dynamic of late-night scenes. In Chicago, he had begun to understand his personality and physical bearing as a kind of talent. He was funny and gay and six feet five; people gravitated toward him and wanted him to come to their parties. He got a job at a trendy women's boutique in Wicker Park, AKIRA, where he helped clients find going-out outfits. Often, those clients would invite him to clubs. Soon, he was a night-life fixture.

"I am the No. 1 person who will tell you that I hate gay bars, because I don't have as much power there," he told me. "Black and skinny and charismatic—it gives you much more power in a straight bar than in a gay bar. I wasn't threatening to the straight men there. And I was also a weird honeypot for the night clubs because all these fun girls would want to stick around longer to hang out, and buy more bottles, too." Night life is a churning economy, only partially visible to most people, a system behind a veil.

He carved out a similar space in L.A., getting a day job where cool and connected people were sure to buy clothes—Barneys this time—and becoming a regular presence in the clubs. He made friends, some of them in show business, and asked around about how to find his way in the industry. Among the people he talked to at parties were important



future collaborators: the writer and director Sam Levinson, the filmmaker Janicza Bravo. "I think that my verbal abilities helped me navigate the space," he said. "And also my style. I have good-to-decent style."

Harris got small acting gigs: he starred in a short film directed by the actor James Franco; he appeared, very briefly, in the Terrence Malick movie "Song to Song." But he hated the idea of being at the mercy of gatekeepers, who, like his teachers at DePaul, might label him uncastable. When Lena Dunham's show "Girls" débuted on HBO, in the spring of 2012, he saw her as a kindred spirit, and a role model. Watching "Girls," he thought, "This is so perfect, and also I think I could do it."

Like Dunham—and like Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, of "Broad City," another inspiration—Harris and Erika Simpson, his friend from DePaul, created a Web series, "#NightStrife," and uploaded it to YouTube. "It's two twentysomethings trying to get famous," Simpson says, by way of explanation, in the first episode. They made only a few episodes, which were not widely seen, though a tongue-in-cheek series promo of sorts, titled "Black Girl Takes a Shit," has been watched nearly eighty thousand times.

Harris became jaded about Hollywood; he stopped acting, and stopped referring to himself as an actor. He started to call himself a playwright, though he had yet to write a play. He cast about for ideas, unsuccessfully, until he went on a date with a porn star, whose stories yielded the material for Harris's first play, "Xander Xyst, Dragon: 1," a kind of fantasia on the theme of online celebrity. With the play—which featured music by Isabella Summers, of Florence and the Machine, another friend he'd made in L.A.—he won a spot at the Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Short Play Festival, in 2014. There, he met a group of young playwrights who are now his contemporaries: Will Arbery, Martyna Majok, Leah Nanako Winkler, Eleanor Burgess.

Afterward, he applied for a fellowship at the MacDowell artists' residency—and, when he was wait-listed, he called the administration every day until someone told him yes. At MacDowell, he met the playwright Amy Herzog, who encouraged him to apply to Yale. He'd already finished a draft of "Daddy," and he submitted it to the drama school's admissions board, along with a heartfelt essay. "The clearest memory I have of my childhood is elegantly staged," he wrote. "Delicately, it moves in a realm between the cinematic and the theatrical: lights up on an open screen door leading into a wide hallway, my mother (early 30s) downstage paces from one off

MR. SANDMAN

We picked at grains of salt between our toes.
A sloppy midnight snack in bed, the loose
shaker cap . . . While rain tapped the small skylight
like sparrows' beaks, we crabbed around
ourselves, the hollows and divots of age.
We bit and sucked and sniffed all over.
We licked our grainy fishiness.
You pawed my ears through crispy sheets.

We had so little rain that winter.
It brushed and patted the misted glass
like creaky blown sand from no shore.
Did we shake out the sheets? Of course not.
We wanted sex and its rank damp.
The rainfall slowed to a fine dust-grit
shaken on us in these late shadowed years,
as if to calm the restless salt we are.

—*W. S. Di Piero*

stage room to another whispering vitriol into a cordless phone, somewhere further off stage we can hear the sounds of a young girl crying, and upstage in profile I sit (12) back to back with a large suitcase looking out of the open door periodically. . . . Suddenly the crying stops replaced by The Pointer Sisters and my mother is standing with my sister in her arms in the middle of the hall tears, a smile and snot dancing on her face, 'He's not coming. Come on baby, let's dance,' she said. So we did."

Harris has come to see "Daddy" as a play about furthering his career by seeking the opportunity and resources that an institution like Yale can provide. "Going to Yale was me deciding to marry a white guy on a hill and in order to have the time and space to make my work," he told one interviewer. Elsewhere, he has described the play as an attempt "to parse the ways I was cradled, coddled and collected by white institutions and how I've collected and used them in turn." He once wrote that he went to Yale with eyes open, "believing that I could take more from this place than they would take from me."

In early 2021, the demands of Harris's still fairly young renown finally called him back to New York. *Town & Country* had planned a multi-page spread to showcase his newly designed home office, which had been furnished by the chic design firm Green River Project. On a cold, pewter-sky morning in January, Harris sat in a studio belonging to Aaron Aujla, one of the firm's owners, at a nondescript former warehouse in Brooklyn, getting ready to have his picture taken. Someone tended to his hair, always a foremost point of interest in the looks he puts together for magazine covers and red carpets. There were small, feathery tufts of it strewn about the studio's bright-green floor.

"I think I want just a mustache," Harris said. He'd come to the shoot with several pictures of the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima at the ready on his phone. He pulled one up: Mishima in his office, behind a desk and flanked by books, pouting fiercely at the camera, his dark brows writhing. The writer's louche, vaguely sexual gaze did have something of the solitary mustache about it.

Harris has often, with a bit of a wink—and in spite of Mishima's reactionary politics—called Mishima his favorite writer. A few months earlier, he had tweeted, "Ok guys so to combat seasonal / pandemic depression and the sense that my life moves at a pace my body can't keep up with I've decided to do a workout every day a la my favorite writer YUKIO MISHIMA. Who combatted depression and dread w/ workouts and a failed coup d'état." In 1970, Mishima and several members of a militia that he had formed attempted to take over a Japanese military base, in the hope of inspiring an overthrow of the country's constitution. After a fiery speech, Mishima—obsessed with physical beauty and warlike vigor—killed himself with a sword. "Do I hate fascists?" Harris wrote, in another tweet. "Yes. Do I love Mishima? Yes. I'm a Gemini. Two truths can be held."

Aujla puttered in and out of the studio, smiling and not saying much. He is married to the fashion designer Emily Bode, known for her knit menswear; she and Aujla are neighbors of Harris's, in Chinatown, and have become his friends. She'd brought a rack of clothes for Harris to choose from. Once in a while, he'd disappear behind a curtain and come out wearing a pair of fluid trousers or a lacy top or a burgundy suit, evocative of Mishima. (He selected the suit as one of his outfits.) When something tickled him, he let his voice rise to a high, smoky giggle. "That's cunt," he sometimes said. Between costume changes, he chatted about recent movies, especially a new coming-of-age indie film that everybody seemed to like but that he couldn't bring himself to watch.

"Arvand hates me for this," Harris said, referring to his Hollywood-exec boyfriend, "but I can't stand this kind of shit." He went on, "It's always that same thing: 'Here I am, marginalized little kid—Black, immigrant, gay, whatever—and here's the *wide, wide world*.'" By now he was acting out the archetype, hunched into a pantomime of childish wonder, his eyes big with fear, his hands clasped. "And now there's big trouble"—he cowered in terror—"and inner strife"—he anxiously trembled—"but soon"—now he let a smile spread across his face—"I overcome."

"I knew exactly what that movie was gonna be the moment it started, and I was, like, No, thank you," he said. Bode, who has a slim face framed by twin curtains of dark hair and speaks in a soft, helpful voice, like that of an expensive therapist, laughed until her face turned pink.

When the shoot was over, Harris took an Uber to Bedford-Stuyvesant to visit the studio of another artist friend, the photographer Matthew Leifheit. Like Harris, Leifheit went to Yale for graduate school and is the entrepreneurial, self-sustaining center of his own career. He edits the magazine *MATTE*, makes



photo books, and teaches workshops across the country. They met because of Harris's insistence, in New Haven, on spreading his presence far beyond the confines of the drama school: he was known to drop in on photography critique sessions and to speak up, offering references and suggestions. "A lot of people thought he was part of the photo program," John Pilson, one of the program's longest-serving faculty members, said. "By the end, we all expected to see him every week."

Harris had arrived at Yale in 2016. Several of his classmates were far beyond him professionally: they'd had shows produced, they had agents. He was eager to catch up, but soon found himself at odds with the institution. The curriculum was too conservative for his taste; he felt that his instructors were dismissive of his interest in more experimental work. He started taking classes in Black studies and poetry. He also began work on "Slave Play," which he says "poured out" of him almost whole. He was assigned a faculty adviser, the acclaimed playwright and director Young Jean Lee, who would help shepherd a student production.

Lee is a longtime downtown experimentalist, and many of her work's subjects—race, class, the body—are also crucial to Harris; he was excited to work with her. But she had extensive notes on "Slave Play," which Harris mostly declined to take. She objected strongly to the final act, set in the bedroom of a Black woman named Kaneisha and her white British husband, Jim. Their therapy has been a disaster, largely because of Jim's refusal to go along with goofily degrading role-play. Kaneisha calls Jim a "virus," and connects their relationship to the brutalities of the past; Jim gets back into character, as a slave master, and gives Kaneisha the abasement she seems to have been asking for.

This sequence, the most hotly debated part of "Slave Play," stayed in the show, even after the move to Broadway. When Lee saw it in a dress rehearsal, she was horrified; later, she told Harris that it took her more than an hour to calm down enough to give him feedback. The two then exchanged lengthy text messages. "I hope that no one has ever spoken that violently to you about work that so deeply intersects with your being, and if they have I'm sorry," Harris wrote. Lee replied, "If you're that irresponsible about putting a rape of a female body onstage, I'm going to call you out on it in no uncertain terms. To turn it around and call me the violent one is a classic move that has been done to me many times, and I've never fallen for it, and I'm not falling for it now."

Their dispute culminated in a formal complaint process, presided over by Tarell Alvin McCraney, who leads the drama school's playwriting program. Harris used transcripts from those meetings in "Yell: A 'Documentary' of My Time Here," his senior thesis play. I went to see it, in New Haven, in 2019. By then, Harris had already staged "Slave Play" and "Daddy" Off Broadway, but he still had something to prove to his teachers. The most constant formal structure in "Yell" is repeated acts of onstage defecation. Fake shit was everywhere at Yale's Iseman Theatre that day.

Harris has said that "Yell" was inspired by the radical 1967 essay "The Student as Nigger," by Jerry Farber, which compares the relationship between American students and their professors to that of slaves and masters. In June, 2020, at the height of the George Floyd protests, Harris shared "Yell" online, and wrote a long accompanying Twitter thread in which he posted screenshots of his text exchange with Lee, who declined to comment for this story. "EVERY DAY THEY TREATED ME LIKE A NIGGA THAT NEEDED TO BE TAMED AND IT MADE ME FEEL CRAZY," he wrote.

In September, 2021, Harris sat in a chair in a bathroom at a ritzy hotel in New York. The Tonys were finally being awarded that night, and he'd booked a suite nearby, where he could

get ready. Also in the bathroom were his hairdresser, Latisha Chong, and a woman tending to his makeup and nails. He sat stock-still, never wincing as Chong pulled through his Afro and started to braid. The three of them, mutually devoted to the task of flashy beauty, calmly chatted about people they knew in common.

"Everybody who knows him thinks he's gay," Harris said. "But, I'm telling you, he's straight." Both women disbelievingly harrumphed. "Bone straight," he said.

The bathroom was a center of calm in the otherwise hectic suite. Harris occasionally got up to take a Polaroid of the room—an editor at *Vogue* had commissioned him to keep a photo diary. Also milling around were two camerapeople shooting footage for a "Slave Play" documentary that Harris had promised to deliver to HBO. They swanned around the room, sometimes going out on the balcony to capture views of downtown and the West Side. Beyond and between the buildings, you could see the Hudson quietly snaking along.

Harris's assistant kept running out of the room, collecting bouquets of flowers and other gifts that were arriving in a steady stream. Harris had recently interviewed the young gay rapper Lil Nas X for a *GQ* profile. "Montero—he's brilliant," he said, using the rapper's given name. "The interview felt kind of like a first date." He asked his assistant to put on a song from Lil Nas X's new album, a catchy single called "Industry Baby." "This one is gonna be huge," Harris said.

Friends continually appeared, at his invitation. His mother and niece were getting their makeup done in a neighboring room. Candace Owen-Williams, his old teacher, was there, too, in a sparkly gown. Harris pointed her out to each new arrival and repeated the story of how she made him feel less alone at school.

This is how Harris relaxes—sitting somewhere near the center of a crowd that he's convened. Antwaun Sargent, an art critic and a gallerist with Gagosian, walked over to the ledge where Harris's gold accessories, custom-made for him by the haute-couture house Schiaparelli, sat gleaming. There were chunky rings and cufflinks, a necklace with a pendant made from a cast of Harris's ear, a "Phantom of the Opera"-style mask modelled after a swooping section of his face.

As the sun began to set and the light in the room darkened, Harris asked everyone to leave so that he could ready himself for the show. That night, in a surprise to prognosticators, "Slave Play" was completely shut out—twelve nominations, nothing to bring home. The next day, the online edition of Page Six carried the headline "Jeremy O. Harris celebrates Tony snubs with two afterparties."

Early last year, Harris tweeted a casual swipe at the state of television. "I write tv for people who have an intellect for theatre since tv is hollow," he wrote. "Bc the funny thing is the reason so many filmmakers and theatre makers were asked to make television is bc the medium hit a wall. That's why almost all the best tv, of late, has been made by exciting practitioners of other forms."

Stung TV writers and irritated critics noted that Harris now made much of his living from television, and not always in its most rarefied corners. In 2021, he'd done a cameo, as himself, on the reboot of "Gossip Girl." (The script called for a play within the show, which Harris wrote; later, he got it commissioned by the Public Theatre.) Then he was cast, as a fashion designer, in the second season of "Emily in Paris," Darren Starr's critically maligned Netflix series about an American influencer who gets a job in France. The show's producers told Harris that they were looking for someone reminiscent of a young André Leon Talley.

Sharper observers of Harris's commentary noticed that he was playing a familiar role. "I support Jeremy O Harris being snotty about TV," the *Times* critic Jason Zinoman wrote. "Playwrights used to be like this all the time. It's a glorious tradition." The path from New York theatre to a career in Hollywood—where the money and the weather are better, and the audiences are bigger—has been traversed by writers for almost a century. And Harris seemed to be giving television a dose of his usual medicine: let me in and I'll give you a piece of my mind.

But on his winding path to playwriting, Harris had made the kinds of friends you would make if you were aiming for the screen all along. When Harris was still at Yale, Sam Levinson made him a consultant for his notoriously lurid HBO teen drama "Euphoria." (Harris is now a producer on the series.) Janicza Bravo got Harris hired as the co-writer for her movie "Zola," adapted from a riotous series of tweets.

His steadiest Hollywood employment came in the form of the HBO deal that he signed in 2020. The following year, the network announced that he would adapt the novel "The Vanishing Half," by Brit Bennett, along with the playwright Aziza Barnes, a friend of his. The novel tells the story of twin sisters whose fates diverge: one dissolves into the American mainstream, passing as white; the other anchors herself in Black community. Harris and Barnes assembled a writers' room to produce a pilot and a "show bible," outlining the plot of the first season. They led the writers on a research trip to New Orleans, where much of "The Vanishing Half" is set. As the weeks passed, Harris was often airborne, travelling to fashion gigs, conducting interviews for magazines. When he signed the HBO deal, he'd insisted that his contract contain an annual fund for supporting theatre, and he'd used some of that money to create a fellowship for emerging writers. He was always *working*. He just wasn't always writing.

Then, the following June, the Daily Beast reported that Harris and Barnes were no longer working on the show. The article cited two sources who claimed that Harris "was let go after having trouble meeting script deadlines." HBO insisted that he had not been fired. There had simply been creative differences, which were "part of the normal development process." Harris, HBO added, "is a valued collaborator, and we currently have other projects in development with him." (He is no longer on an exclusive deal with HBO but continues to work with the network.)

I visited Harris, at his apartment, a couple of weeks later. It was a bright July day, hot in the sun but buoyed by a breeze. He answered the door wearing a long green terry-cloth robe, with dark polish on his fingernails. His young nephew had been wanting to paint his nails and was getting grief about it in his Southern milieu, Harris said, so he

had painted his in solidarity. "Sometimes I think people don't want him to be a 'punk' like Uncle Jeremy," he said.

The Daily Beast hadn't reported any details about Harris's approach to the "Vanishing Half" adaptation, but I had heard, from several friends, about a proposed scene in which a lot of feces is flung around. It sounded preposterous but not entirely unlikely. Harris, in his work, likes to explain drastic external action by way of uncomfortable, abject, and often lewd interior depths. His characters earn their brief glories after trudging through lots of shame; his people get splattered.

Harris seemed surprised that I'd heard about the scene in such detail, but was happy to discuss it. He loved Bennett's book, but wanted to interpret it freely, even radically, something TV writers don't do enough, he said. One addition he and the writers envisioned was a surrealistic quasi-dream sequence that would send a character's consciousness "skipping like a stone across the waters of time," as Harris put it in the show bible. The character would witness a "depraved ritual" meant to cleanse a small town of its communal sins, and the dark bacchanal would include "blackface masks, buffoonery and flying mud and feces." It would end with "infidelities, thefts and dark family secrets ushered from the shadows into the light."

Harris was less annoyed by people gossiping about his work than by the suggestion, in the Daily Beast and elsewhere, that he wasn't a hard worker. "I'm actually really insecure about that," he said.

He was about to go abroad, and he wanted a new swimsuit for the summer trip; he'd asked Emily Bode to design one for him. We walked to her small tailoring shop in Chinatown, where a board high up on a brownish wall announced the prices for alterations. Half-done garments hung on faceless mannequins.

A tailor silently took Harris's measurements, then gave him the swimsuit that Bode had left for him to try on: a lime-green one-piece with thin tank-top straps and tight shorts. He had seemed sedate and almost tired in the apartment, but now his mood lifted. He retreated behind a curtain, then came out wearing the suit, hugging his thin body. It fit. He looked into a mirror and spread his arms. He was already smiling.

One night last October, Harris went to the Brooklyn Academy of Music to see the renowned Belgian theatre director Ivo van Hove's adaptation of the novel "A Little Life," by Hanya Yanagihara. Harris is friendly with Yanagihara—he'd spoken with her about acting in a possible TV adaptation of the book. He attended the play with an old roommate from his Yale days, Michael Breslin, who co-founded the theatre collective Fake Friends. Harris has co-produced two of the collective's shows: "Circle Jerk," a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for drama, and "This American Wife," a harrowing parody of Bravo's "Real Housewives" franchise.

"A Little Life" centers on a group of friends in New York, one of whom, a saintly character named Jude, is repeatedly flayed by acts of unspeakable violence. Like "Slave Play," the novel was dogged by accusations of sadism. After the show, Harris, who has cited the Marquis de Sade as a formative influence, chatted with his friends. They all agreed that some of the show's most excruciating scenes, which had provoked gasps in the audience, could have been, in keeping with the book, a bit more graphic.

Harris took a car home, stopping for a drink at a bar near his apartment. Writers—a species always overrunning those blocks, which have come to be called Dimes Square—spilled out of restaurants and sidewalk sheds. For a few minutes, cradling his drink, Harris argued amiably with a pop-music critic about the recently released movie "Tár," which Harris hated.

Back at his apartment, he ate and paced and talked—softly, because a friend, one in a rotating series of medium-term guests, was sleeping in the next room. Soon, Khosravi came home. Like Harris, he is tall and slender and demonstrative; subtle streaks of gray run through the ringlets of his hair. Unlike Harris, he seldom seems excited to argue. Before Khosravi, Harris had a boyfriend who broke up with him in part, Harris says, because of his sudden fame. "Arvand doesn't mind that I'm a star," he once told me.

The couple talked for a while about their friends—somebody was drinking too much, somebody wasn't eating—until Khosravi began to look anxious. They were flying in the morning to a gala in Bentonville, Arkansas, at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Harris didn't seem stressed.

The next day, at the museum, as Harris wandered a room with paintings by Kehinde Wiley, Amy Sherald, and Kerry James Marshall, Khosravi surprised him by getting on one knee and proposing marriage. He'd had a ring designed by a pair of jewellers who lived across the street from them in London and had become their friends. And he'd asked the playwright Adrienne Kennedy—a hero of Harris's, and now a frequent e-mail correspondent of his—to write a bene-



"Take care out there today, hon. The front door is riddled with bullet holes."

diction, to be etched on the inside. It reads, "Happiness. Is. To me. Greatest Thing." Harris said yes.

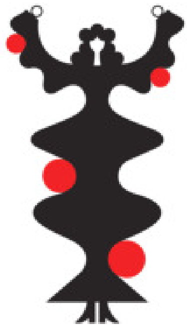
A day later, he giddily recounted the proposal on Twitter, adding a pinch of social critique. "But someone, I guess I will?, needs to write about how cringe it is to be proposed to when you haven't been socialized to be waiting for it," he wrote. "It's a really violent trap we set for both parties where you're asked to be in a play you know the script to and if you deviate from it 💔."

Harris's doomsaying in 2020—his sense that the gatekeepers were not doing enough to reimagine and thus preserve the world of theatre—has arguably been validated, in the worst way, in the three years since then. A wave of closures and layoffs has prompted a rash of op-eds about the future of the medium. Harris, as contrarian as ever, is not abandoning the theatre but, rather, becoming something of a gatekeeper himself: he has lately been, almost above all else, a facilitator of other people's work.

He is currently the presiding playwright for the Yale Drama Series, a role that involves judging the program's annual prize. After he took the position, last year, he began conceiving a writers' retreat for some of the prize's finalists—inspired, in part, by his experience at MacDowell. In March, he announced the inaugural Substratum fellows: four young playwrights who would spend a month at a medieval house, part of the hotel Monteverdi Tuscany, which, along with Gucci, would help cover the expenses.

He was in Italy with the fellows when he got a text from the actress Rachel Brosnahan, who, along with Oscar Isaac, was starring in a revival of Lorraine Hansberry's 1964 play "The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window," at BAM. She hoped he'd come see it. He said he was abroad, and asked if the play might be extended or transferred; she didn't think so. "I'm going to get you to Broadway," he replied. He phoned producer friends, and together they engineered a brief transfer to the James Earl Jones Theatre—another play set to open there had seen its financing collapse. The Hansberry revival wouldn't run long enough to turn a profit, but it would get a wider audience for a work by another of Harris's playwriting heroes. And the quick transfer suggested a different approach, perhaps, for Broadway: If space opens up, why not take a few chances?

In August, Harris went to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in the Berkshires, to spend two weeks acting in a movie directed by Pete Ohs, who edited the "Slave Play" documentary. Ohs makes largely improvised movies for twenty thousand dollars or less; the tiny budget meant that he could shoot without breaking the rules of the Writers Guild of America strike, which had begun in the spring and showed no signs of ending. The film was a country-house nightmare about contracting disease from deer ticks.



The cast was staying at the house, which belonged to the actress Callie Hernandez, one of Ohs's collaborators. In the brightness of the afternoon, a wall of trees outside was variously green: dark pine, mild maple, vivid oak. Inside, James Cusati-Moyer, who was in "Slave Play"—his character, a gay man, refuses to describe himself as white—stood at the kitchen counter, mixing flaxseed, honey, psyllium husk, and cranberries in a steel bowl. He was making gluten-free bread, from a TikTok recipe. "You want a kind of cakey texture," he said. "The woman in the video is incredibly annoying, but the bread is great."

The movie would begin shooting that night. Harris changed into a white linen caftan and went into town for groceries—he'd volunteered to make dinner, for the second day in a row. He drives with a country boy's ease; he learned at fourteen, when his mother realized how impossible it would be for her to chauffeur him to all of his activities. He'd already acclimated somewhat to the roads of Great Barrington, and to its local lore. "Birthplace of W. E. B. DuBois," he said. "They can't shut up about it—he's, like, the only Black guy they know."

Loping through the aisles at the grocery store, he picked up ears of corn with stringy husks and a pack of what he called "white-people aluminum foil," packaged in a recyclable-looking brown paper box. He'd begun writing a novel about a Black writer beset by deadlines and grief. Harris was very close with his mother's parents, who have both died in the past few years—his grandfather, Golden, died two weeks before "Slave Play" débuted on Broadway. "Writing isn't fun," he said.

At lunch, in a small bakery across the street from a general store, he told me that his cash flow was slowing down as a result of the strike. "The other day, my niece asked me for a new phone, and I had to say no," he said. "I told her, 'I'm not trying to be mean—I'm broke.'" He pays private-school tuition for her and his nephew; he bought a home, in Virginia, for his mom. He was worried about falling behind on payments.

Back at the house, he enlisted his castmates as sous-chefs—chopping herbs, buttering corn—and began to cook. People were trying on clothes and critiquing the outfits. Would this work for the character? What else did it need? Cusati-Moyer was in a loose crop top. Harris loved it.

"I feel bloated from the bread," Cusati-Moyer said.

"You are," Harris said, grinning.

"This is what he was like," Cusati-Moyer told the others. "He builds you up and then he breaks you back down!"

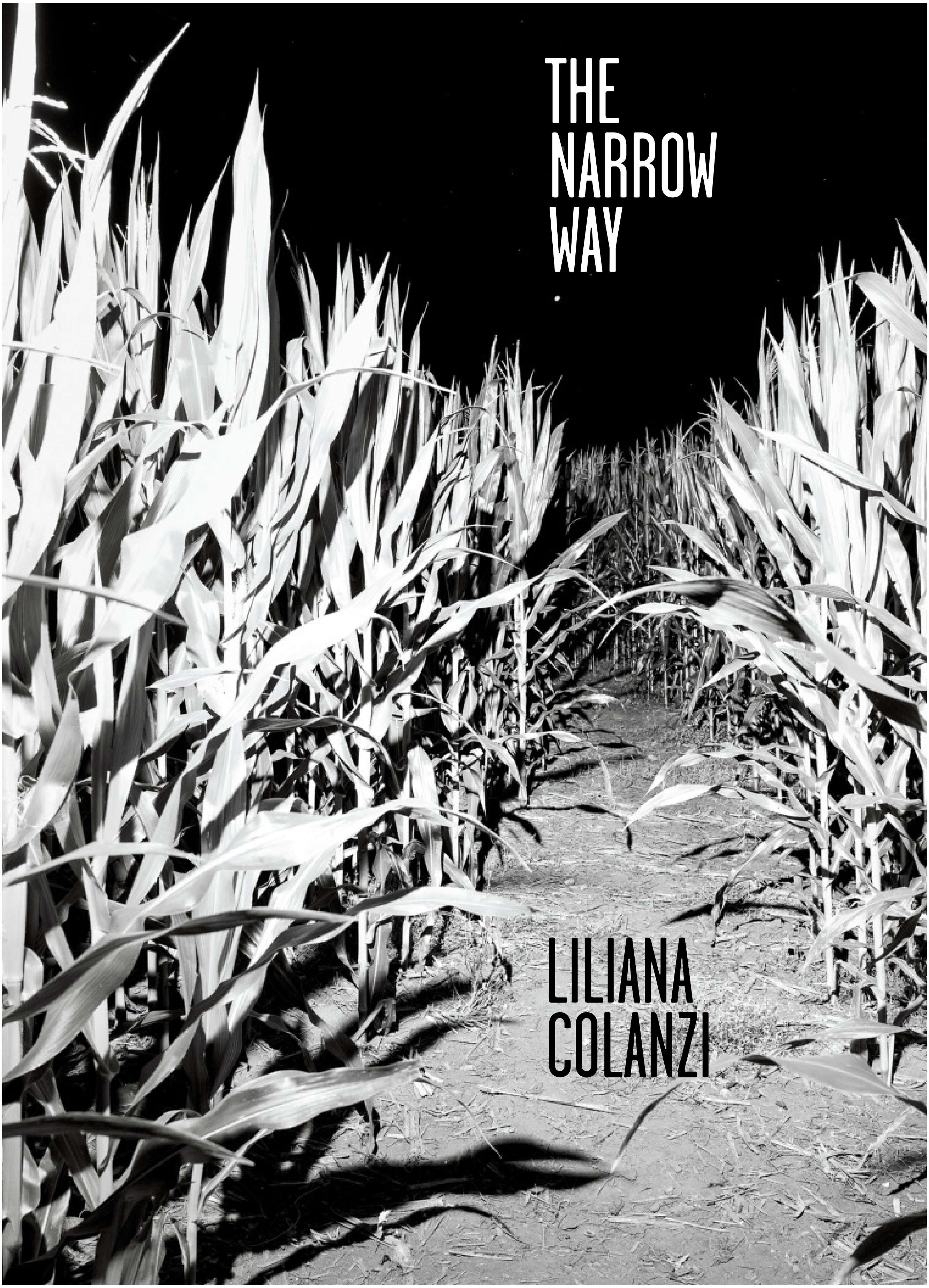
Harris called his mom to ask her advice on the meal—pork chops, roasted corn, fried apples, all callbacks to his childhood. Should he melt the butter, put the apples in the cast iron, and *then* pour the sugar in?

"I don't know if you know this," he told her, "but there's a white way to make this, where you don't just pour sugar."

"Yeah, well, we make it the Black way," his mom said. They talked about Harris's niece, and about the patterns his mom had begun to notice in her romantic life, and about literature. They sounded like siblings who take turns being in control.

She said that she wanted to write a book about her life. "The best way to write is to read really good things," Harris said. "You have to read this book by a French woman named Annie Ernaux. 'Happening.' You'll really like it."

He sat in the kitchen, with food in the oven and on the stove, steeling himself quietly for work later on, chatting with his mother. For a moment, his life seemed almost normal. ♦



THE NARROW WAY

LILIANA COLANZI

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM MEBANE

The Devil can be a cloud, a shadow, a gust of wind that shakes the leaves. He can be the nightjar flying across the sky or a reflection on the surface of the river. Some say that he travels with the wind, others that he dwells in electricity. There are those who swear that he hides in the jungle, beyond the perimeter, where the branches whisper secrets that drive men crazy. But the Devil is also the scarecrow that runs across the fields when everyone is asleep.

"The World Outside is made of darkness," the Reverend says, "and whoever crosses the perimeter shall be swept away by the shadows. That is why we must not let ourselves be diverted from the narrow way, the way of our Lord. *Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*"

My sister, Olga, got tired of life on the narrow way. She and I used to sleep together, and sometimes, in the darkness, we'd play cows and calves. Susana, let's play cows and calves, she'd say, and lift up her nightie to offer me her tit. Her armpit hairs tickled my face like corn floss, and the inside of her arm smelled like warm ashes and bonfire smoke. I sucked on her tit as if I were the little calf that Jacinta the cow had just dropped, and Olga had to cover her mouth so she wouldn't wake Father and Mother.

When people leave, they vanish into the shadows, Mother used to say. We never see them again, because we are the people of the narrow way, who work the earth and speak the name of God while waiting for the end of time. Here we conquer nature by the force of tractors and prayer, taming the wilderness, subjecting it to order. Beyond the perimeter lies the jungle with its shadows, and beyond that the city with its illusions. If we are ever tempted to see what there is outside the colony, the obedience collar reminds us where we belong: at a distance of forty yards from the perimeter the current is a mere tickle, but as we approach the magnetic field the shocks become more intense, more compelling, until we turn back to the way of the Lord.

The perimeter is our heritage, a reminder of our triumph over the world. But, according to Olga, the adults made up those stories about the Outside just to scare us.

"There are no rivers of blood or flying letters or any of that stuff," Olga said. "For the people out there, *we're* the Outside. It's not like there are two skies; we're all the same, them and us and the animals."

"Be quiet," I replied.

The Devil gets into our thoughts, coiling up, spying, spinning his web. We were making marmalade in the kitchen; through the window, we could see Father unhitching the horse and unloading the gallons of herbicide he had bought in the city to spray on the cornfields. We wanted to see if the pockets of his overalls were bulging, because that was the sign that he had come back with delicious things we don't have in the colony, like locoto candies or liquid-center bubble gum, but the only thing bulging in Father's overalls was his belly.

Olga spat into the pan of boiling marmalade for the sheer pleasure of watching the phlegm dissolve slowly among the red bubbles. It wasn't for us, that marmalade: Father took it to the city when money was running short. Our spirits were weak. Olga and I dreamed of the city and everything that lay beyond the perimeter; we seized on snatches of music from vehicles driving past on the highway and scoured the sky for aircraft, full of passengers, brushing the stars.

Mother had gone to the city once, many years earlier, not long after I was born. Whenever we asked her what it was like, she would suddenly go deaf. Mother, tell us what it's like. What did you see? What's there? Not a word. The men went to the city, with the Reverend's permission, to buy supplies, and sometimes they came back different, bareheaded, happier. That's why Olga spat in the marmalade: at least a part of her, she said, would leave the colony and travel to the city.

"I arranged to meet Jonas," Olga said.

I went Sh-h-h, because Father was not far away.

Since we'd started meeting Jonas Feinman in the fields, Olga had changed. Jonas lived with his father and siblings in a house near the perimeter, and when the Feinman brothers were little they used to play with the magnetic field, approaching it to see who could stand the electric shocks the longest. Jonas's mother died of her last pregnancy: she put a knitting needle all the way in and scraped around inside until she bled to death. They didn't take her to the city to save her, because she was damned already. People said it was hard for the Feinman children to keep to the narrow way because they had grown up without a mother; any distraction led them astray.

The tallest one, Jonas, began to take an unhealthy interest in the highway. One night, he heard laughter and voices, and climbed out his bedroom window, barefoot. Beyond the perimeter he saw the blinking eyes of motorbikes. The intruders had long hair and fingerless black leather gloves, and when they saw Jonas they whistled to him.

"Hey, come on over, nothing'll happen to you, we've got metamaterial," they called out.

They spoke Bolivian, so Olga and I couldn't understand, but Jonas could because he was already old enough to go to the city with his father to buy seeds. The metamaterial came in a little box with a picture of a coiled-up snake. As well as deactivating the obedience collar, it interfered with the magnetic field, opening a breach in the perimeter. Through this gap, the size of a door, Jonas could cross to the other side without being electrocuted.

The young men provided safe conduct for dissidents. Their fathers had been fugitives, former followers of the narrow way who had escaped from the colony by digging a tunnel with the single-minded patience of a jungle armadillo, men who had betrayed the race by living with Bolivian women. It was forbidden to mention their sons. They were like us but different: they had broad cheeks and dark skin, but light eyes and long bones. They persuaded Jonas to ride on the back of a motorcycle to the city, where people live in defiance of the Word, so that he

SO ATTACHED YOU ARE TO LIVING IN THE WORLD

Cut off access to the feeding stream and the water will come instead from below. Will rise
and form puddles on the hill, even in dry weather.

The pattern of woven and knitted grasses, the plethora of knots worked by wind—like you,
it undoes

everything it does. Reckless skies, falling trees, horizon floating like algae.
You try to see yourself from the outside, where the weather

is spinning. You identify with the largest predator
because she never lets you near. Ruthless,

unabating in her shyness. Through this unseasonal flowering
the heron keeps spearing tadpoles. You can see her but you can't

get as close as you'd like. You lose track of your mind in the satellite photo. Are you
the solitary wood duck, its markings sleeker without the flock? Are you

the heron's wet legs, are you the straight-line wind?
Are you your own mistake, your own darling? Again and again you ocean the marsh,

lock the hurricane in the bathtub.
You walk straight into the spider's web and close its door behind you.

—*Melissa Ginsburg*

could see for himself what it was like.

The dissidents brought him back to the colony at dawn and used their metamaterial to let him cross the perimeter. Soon he was back with the cows, milking and lugging the hay, getting yelled at by old Feinman, who was famous for having kicked his horse to death one stormy night. But Jonas didn't care about the old man's bad temper, or the cows and their ticks, because he was still stunned, dazzled, and thrilled by what he'd seen. From then on he started meeting the dissidents at the perimeter before midnight and returning in the early hours of the morning. Seeing him distracted, weary, and yawning all day, old Feinman began to get riled up.

•

One Sunday after Mass, Jonas took Olga and me to an abandoned stable to show us something. Ever since Olga's growth spurt and the appearance of her hips, men had kept having something to show her. Jonas threatened to kill us if we told anyone.

"I'll cut your tongue out with a machete and give it to the pigs to eat," he warned, but there was no need, because simply being found with a boy would get you at least three days in the cage.

Jonas shifted a brick in the wall of the stable, reached into the hiding place, and took out a little metallic ball that gave off a pink glow. The ball picked up a signal from Outside; the guys had given it to him so they could stay in touch. Fear rose from the pit of my stomach, swirling weirdly. Jonas placed the metallic ball on a brick; it began to wake up and blink and make a noise like boiling oil. Then the ball spoke with a woman's voice, hoarse and measured.

"What's it saying?" Olga asked.

But there was no time to reply. The voice suddenly fell silent and music burst out, made up of whistles and hisses, animal noises, ringing, things falling or rubbing together. We responded to the music with every bone in our bodies, vibrating as if we were made of echoes and tremors. I don't know how long we spent absorbing that poisoned rhythm, but that afternoon I understood that the metallic ball was the Devil's work.

Outside the abandoned stable, the wind combed miles of identical fields in one direction, blowing on them as if from a huge, angry mouth. Inside, Olga screamed with laughter, contorting herself.

"I'll show you how they dance in the city," Jonas said, approaching my sister.

•

"Time is an illusion produced by the Devil," the Reverend said. "Centuries may go by Outside, but the time of the Lord is one and the same, and never passes."

•

"Once when I was cleaning the roof, a bird came to visit," Jonas said. "It flew very high over the perimeter to get to me. I gave it some bread crumbs to eat."

"All the birds I come across have been electrocuted," Olga said.

"O.K., say 'Jukumari bear.'"

"What kind of bear?"

"A kind there used to be."

"What's it like riding a motorbike?" I wanted to know.

"Like flying."

•

Rosie Fischer had a problem or a gift, depending on how you looked at it: her dreams came out of her head. Once she dreamed of a rhinoceros beetle; when she opened her eyes, the creature was crawling across her chest. One day she woke up screaming "The ladder!" just as Klaus Ertland, who was climbing up to the roof to fix a solar panel, lost his footing, fell, and broke his neck. Another time she dreamed of men with flags coming to check if we could read and knew the national anthem and swore allegiance to the country we'd never seen. By then Rosie's dreams were well known, and when the people from the government turned up at the colony we were ready and waiting with freshly baked cakes and the gift of a large suitcase. They opened the case, counted the bills, and left. They didn't come back.

We liked Rosie Fischer: her smell, her little blond mustache, her broad back.

The three of us used to go and help the widow Elisabeth Kornmeier mend her children's clothes. Jacob Kornmeier had had the misfortune to die of a facial tumor, leaving his wife with eleven children, the youngest not yet weaned. The poor woman was very stupid: she never learned to cook or keep her house clean. When her children cried, she would cry along with them. The baby always had diaper rash. At the end of the afternoon, the widow would offer us cookies that were always hard and tasted of dirt, but we'd eat them without a word. We liked her. On the way home we looked for the baubles of the goldenberry hidden in the grass, played at spitting as far as we could, and ran around.

One time we spied on Daniel Wender when he was shitting in the field.

One time there was blood on my dress and I started crying because I thought I was going to die. It turned out I was a woman already. Olga and Rosie swore they wouldn't tell.

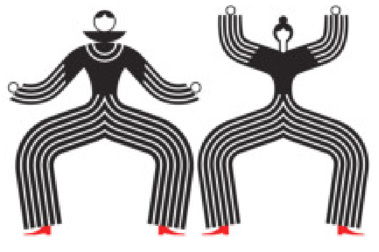
One time we saw the thing behind the shovel, in the barn, and the thing moved. Its legs were folded, it was squatting. It's a toad, said Rosie, who'd seen a picture of one in a book her grandfather kept hidden under his bed. The toad looked at us with its sad face, mildly surprised. We didn't know what to do with it, so we crushed it with the shovel.

One day Rosie dreamed that a beetroot had germinated inside her, a hard, red bulb. Soon it was clear that she was pregnant, and nobody knew who the father was. It was the time of the high winds: the roof came off Aaron Weber's stable and blew away; the palm trees bent over so far their hair beat the ground.

The Reverend said, It's the Devil passing.

The widow Kornmeier's baby got colic, turned red, and died. Gretel, her eighth daughter, said it was the widow's fault: she had breast-fed after arguing with her oldest son and the bad milk had poisoned the baby. They buried him beside his father, in a little box. It rained a lot that day. Everyone left a flower on the grave except for Rosie, who was nowhere to be seen.

That night Olga didn't want to go to sleep. Rosie's dream got her pregnant, she said, lying next to me,



and when I came closer to suck her tit she pushed me away. Don't you want to play cows and calves anymore? I asked. Olga turned her back on me, anxiously pinching her arms to keep her eyes open, afraid of dreaming . . . of what? Children without fathers are leaves on the wind, not knowing who they are, where they come from, what carries them. They have to be given an anchor.

The Reverend said, Rosie will marry Abraham Jensen, and they went to fetch the little retard who talked to his shadow and peed on himself when the bell rang.

Olga found Rosie's body near the perimeter on the way back from grinding corn. At first she thought it was a bundle of clothes that the wind had blown off the line and out to the edge of the colony. Then she noticed the smell of scorched flesh. When they dragged the body back with a shovel, they saw that the obedience collar had made Rosie's eyes pop out and left a black ring around her neck. The Reverend flatly refused to say a Mass for Rosie or allow her to be buried in the cemetery. They threw her into the common grave, where Jonas Feinman's mother had ended up, along with the dogs that nobody owned.

Olga and I kept going to the widow's place to mend clothes. But we no longer looked for fruit in the grass on the way back, or ran around, or felt like whistling.

•

To get over feeling sad about Rosie, Olga invented a game. You had to drink a glass of water, then another, and another. And then, when the pressure in your bladder was becoming unbearable, you had to drink one more glass. After a while the tingling spread in painful waves and you had to contain it. Surround it with thought, concentrate it, rope it like a wild horse.

"Think of the center," Olga said, and the center was a burning tip, a needle heated on an anvil. A lightning bolt.

"I can't think of anything."

"Hold on a bit longer."

She made me drink another glass. The rest of my body had gone numb. Just that instinctive retention. Then she tipped the contents of the pitcher into my lap. Between my legs the waters mixed, cold and warm.

And then the center began to vibrate.

•

"God loves purity," the Reverend said. "Each kind with its own, no mixtures. Purity is perfection. Like attracts like."

Our parents were married in

accordance with this teaching. Mother had turned fifteen. They were of the same blood. When the Reverend married them he said, "God bless this union. From now on you are husband and wife. Previous bonds are dissolved. Share your happiness—may it be multiplied."

They were in love; they wanted many children. Only Olga and I survived.

•

"The eye of the Lord has seen and He is angry," the Reverend repeated as he walked up and down between the rows.

It was spiritual-inspection day: chairs out in the churchyard, everyone present, no one speaking.

"Let the rot emerge into the light of day and dry out in the sun."

The Reverend had X-ray eyes that could see right into us, all the way into the deepest recess where the secret lay buried. He shook a new metal rod over our heads.

"Let the evil in this community come forth."

I was sitting next to Mother, looking down, with Olga right against me, rigid, struggling to keep what we had done from spilling out into the world. I said to my secret, "Hide," and my secret buried itself in the mud of my heart, and when the Reverend's white beard brushed me I looked him in the face with my light eyes. Up close, I could smell his rotten teeth. His eyes raked me with their fire and moved on.

Olga's secret had stayed hidden, too.

I saw the widow Elisabeth Kornmeier looking restless. Suddenly she stood up and said, "In my dreams I lie with a man who is not Jacob." Then she collapsed.

In the row of men, Joshua Keppler, the giant, spoke: "I secretly installed a water heater for the shower," and he burst into tears.

Helmut Bauer confessed that he kept wine in his larder. And so the sins leaped into the Reverend's net as one sinner after another broke down.

Sitting beside old Feinman, Jonas opened his mouth. What will come out? I wondered, tense on my chair. Olga, beside me, was pale. What will his open mouth say? What came out was a bold, luxurious yawn. His father punched him in the face. "Shut it, you brute," he said. "Have some respect."

Blood spurted from Jonas's nose and ran down over his mouth. The Reverend pretended not to have seen.

Passing over our heads, the Reverend's rod made a beeping sound whenever it detected anything metallic, and the guilty had no choice but to show what they were hiding: electric razors, mini-balls for connecting with the Outside, implants. We gazed at all these objects with fear and desire.

The sinners were taken to the cages, which were tall enough to allow for standing prayer. Each penitent entered without complaint, and the Reverend put on the locks. They were left there for ten days to feed the mosquitoes and learn a lesson. By the end, Elisabeth Kornmeier's hair had gone completely white.

And the Reverend said with satisfaction, "The source has been cleansed, the impurity washed away."

But the next day we got dirty again.

•

We went back to the stable to feel the music. It was raining. The sky was electric, gashed with lightning that lit up one cornfield, then another. Thunder boomed. Jonas's nose was crooked from the punch; that was just how his face would look now. He rolled the metallic ball in the palm of his hand. The music bounced off the walls. A lightning flash: Olga lifted up her skirt, giggled, spun around. Another flash: Jonas chased Olga and threw her to the ground. She dug her fingernails into his face, laughing uncontrollably. They had forgotten about me. They wrestled in the shadows. The ball was rolling on the floor, and the voice spoke in our language: You're listening to Dissident Radio.

I felt sad. The world had never seemed so big.

"Jonas," Olga said in the darkness, and she laughed.

•

We returned to the widow's house once more. We found her sitting with a bundle in her arms. She was singing a lullaby:

The bloodthirsty spider spun a sticky trap. A fly came flying by and got stuck in the web.

She had opened all the windows. The cotton curtains were billowing in the breeze. It was like everything was levitating. Her four-year-old son was crying on the floor, beside a broken cup, the palm of his hand red with blood.

The widow smiled as she sang. She held the baby's shroud to her chest; there was dirt on her hands and her clothes.

The little fly was struggling, tangled in the web. The bloodthirsty spider came and ate it up.

"Elisabeth Kornmeier," my sister said. "What's wrong?"

The white hair made her look like an old woman.

"Elisabeth Kornmeier!"

•

I dreamed of an armadillo stopped in the middle of the path. Everything was still, alert, and shining; not a leaf stirred. Behind the armadillo was the tunnel it had dug, little by little, day by day. The armadillo's tunnel went down to the depths of the earth.

•

I opened my eyes. It was night. Olga was sitting on the edge of the bed, coiling her braids on top of her head. Jonas's silhouette was peering in through the window. It was like what happened with Rosie Fischer: a dream had escaped from my head, flown out of me into the world.

If I'd reached out I could have touched Olga. But I didn't move. Father and Mother were snoring in the next room; all I had to do was say something. I pretended to be asleep. Olga laced up her boots.

"I know you're awake," Olga said, with her back to me. "Don't try to find me, pretend I'm dead."

Without looking back, she ran off through the corn, toward the roaring of the motors and the electricity.

I stayed awake: Olga's laughter was shaking the fields. ♦

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Chris Andrews.)



BOOKS

MAKEOVER

Building a billion-dollar beauty brand in the influencer era.

BY MOLLY FISCHER

In 2010, Emily Weiss was working on a *Vogue* photo shoot in Miami when she and Doutzen Kroes got to talking about self-tanner. Weiss was, at the time, an assistant to a freelance stylist. Kroes was among the highest-paid models in the world, and (it emerged) a big fan of L'Oréal Sublime Bronze ProPerfect Salon Airbrush Self-Tanning Mist. "She was like, 'All the other ones are crazy,'" Weiss later recalled. This one, Kroes insisted, was different—she said it didn't even smell. Weiss picked up a bottle at the drugstore and was converted. She pitched a *Vogue* beauty editor and wrote up the recommendation, in what became her first byline for the magazine.

The episode contained, in miniature, the forces Weiss would harness in her career. There was the fast, casual intimacy of talking about beauty products—the conversations about lip gloss or deodorant that could make a bar bathroom (or a photo-shoot trailer) feel like a slumber party. There was the value of personal recommendations, which held up even when the person doing the recommending was perhaps not unbiased. Kroes was a L'Oréal "Ambassador"; getting people to buy such products as Sublime Bronze ProPerfect Salon Airbrush Self-Tanning Mist was her job. But Weiss wasn't put off. An apparently

Emily Weiss, the founder of Glossier, leveraged social-media savvy to sell the fantasy of effortless authenticity.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATE DEHLER

heartfelt recommendation could inspire not just a purchase but some pro-bono promotional work, too.

Not long after the Miami photo shoot, Weiss started her own beauty Web site, Into the Gloss. Within five years, Into the Gloss had given rise to a beauty brand, Glossier; within a decade, Glossier was a billion-dollar business. Weiss is an exceptional success—"the last girlboss standing," as Marisa Meltzer writes in "Glossy" (One Signal), a new book on Weiss and her company. But Weiss is also just one of many young people to seek a fortune on the basis of personality, social-media savvy, and the promise of authenticity. She operated in the realm of the startup; others' ambitions played out amid the "creator economy"—land of Instagram influencers, YouTubers, TikTokers, and more. "There is a sort of parallel universe where Weiss became an influencer instead of a CEO," Meltzer recalls thinking during one of their interviews. "I would be at the Valentino dinner right now," Weiss says when Meltzer mentions the idea, then laughs—in relief, Meltzer thinks.

Weiss grew up amid the bland affluence of Connecticut, where a precocious interest in fashion set her apart from the mall-prep aesthetic that prevailed locally. In her senior yearbook, she was, Meltzer notes, voted not "Best Dressed" but, rather, "Most Likely to Be Famous." Two qualities that worked in her favor were her beauty (she was an occasional model for *Seventeen*) and her self-possessed ambition. As a teen-ager, she talked her way into an internship at Ralph Lauren after babysitting for a neighbor who worked at the company. Her boss at Ralph Lauren put her up for an internship at *Teen Vogue;* her boss at *Teen Vogue* put her up for a role on "The Hills," a reality show whose heroines held dubious internships at the magazine's West Coast office. She appeared in three episodes in 2007, and, Meltzer writes, carried herself "like some kind of insanely confident apparition who has come to show the laconic and provincial stars of the show what working at a magazine really takes." She could have been a villain but instead became a fan favorite.

Spinoffs have been spun from less. But, rather than pursue reality stardom, Weiss returned to New York to work in fashion and magazines. What she really wanted, she said at the time, was to become an editor-in-chief—an ambition just beginning to sound slightly old-fashioned. Style bloggers were already unsettling fashion-world hierarchies.

"Fashion was one of the first industries to recognize the usefulness of bloggers and social media power users," Taylor Lorenz, a reporter at the Washington *Post*, notes in "Extremely Online" (Simon & Schuster), a book about the business of Internet fame. With sponsored posts and affiliate links, bloggers quickly began to demonstrate their promotional might, silencing whatever gripes had greeted their arrival in runway front rows. Weiss spent time in low-level magazine roles before spotting her opening: alongside all the blogs dedicated to personal style, why not one about beauty?

It was promising territory. Beauty, in the twenty-tens, became pop culture. Celebrities (Rihanna, Kylie Jenner) started going beyond ordinary endorsement deals and launching makeup lines of their own. Meanwhile, on YouTube, amateur makeup artists were becoming celebrities. Bathed in the glow of ring lights, they presented tutorials on elaborate techniques: contouring cheekbones, creating smoky eyes, effecting dramatic transformations. (An early hit by the YouTuber Michelle Phan demonstrated how to look like Barbie.) The makeup influencers launched makeup lines, and the occasional non-makeup influencer did, too. Beauty yielded new hobbies (ten-step Korean skin-care routines) and new startup success stories (Drunk Elephant). Traditionally, in the world of fashion media, covering beauty products held less glamour than covering clothes, but now beauty had arrived at the center of attention.

The column that earned Into the Gloss its following was called The Top Shelf. It started as a series of long, loosely edited interviews in which fashion-industry insiders catalogued their beauty routines. Expensive serums, drugstore lotions, toner from France, cream blush from Japan: lists of products were interwoven with the habit, happenstance, superstition, and experimentation that make up the private logic of grooming. The result married the appeal of service journalism and voyeurism. Weiss's initial subjects were stylists, agents, and editors; as the site grew, though, celebrities began to appear, including the new crop of fashion and beauty influencers. "Initially, my YouTube channel wasn't just about makeup," Phan told Weiss in her Top Shelf interview. "But beauty was the first topic that really resonated with the majority of my viewers because every girl can benefit from a beauty tip."

For the earliest installments of The Top Shelf, Weiss brought a camera to document subjects' homes. The still-lifes that resulted—nonchalant bouquets of makeup brushes, perfectly unmade bedside tables—crystallized an aesthetic that would soon become familiar on Instagram. The photo-sharing app got its start in 2010, just as Weiss was launching Into the Gloss, and offered a similar experience: the pleasure of peeking behind closed doors, an imagined intimacy with beautiful people, along with a tantalizing consumer itch. Spending two hundred dollars on a moisturizer seems a lot more plausible once you've seen a jar in someone else's medicine cabinet.

Instagram took a while to decide how this potential ought to be channelled. Lorenz's book documents the ways that different platforms did and didn't accommodate users who hoped to make a living posting content: YouTube, for example, was quick to start a partnership program for sharing advertising revenue. From the beginning, Instagram's approach to commerce on the app was ambivalent. "Instagram was not supposed to be about obvious self-promotion," Kevin Systrom, one of the founders, said in 2012. He didn't want advertising to disturb the app's pristine visual world, and even after its acquisition by Facebook, that year, Instagram avoided running ads. When the company eventually rolled out plans to do so, executives pointed to *Vogue*—fat with sumptuous ads—as its model. Instagram's first advertisement, for Michael Kors, appeared in 2013 and aimed for the midpoint between magazine spreads and emergent social-media tropes: a sharply rendered gold pavé watch, yes, but alongside a plate of pastel macarons.

Yet, even before the app officially welcomed advertising, work-arounds had taken hold. Fashion bloggers had flocked to Instagram, bringing along their brand deals. The platform had discouraged "obvious" promotional content and cleared the way for a subtler, wilier alternative:

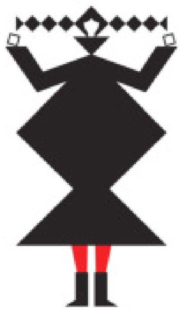
influencer recommendations that, though paid, weren't labelled as such—which, in the eyes of brands, made them only more valuable. As Lorenz explains, "*Because* Systrom had meticulously avoided making Instagram a billboard from day one, it was now a platform where self-promotion and stealth ads were the dominant currency." It was a platform for ads that didn't look like ads, and it would become the perfect place to sell makeup that didn't look like makeup.

By 2013, Into the Gloss was reporting 8.5 million page views per month. An ardent readership congregated in the comment sections, comparing notes on products and suggesting topics for future posts. Weiss was poised to expand, but how? In early meetings with potential V.C. funders, Meltzer says, Weiss floated such possibilities as social networking, e-commerce, or building out a broader publication.

Kim Kardashian once described her own social-media following as a "free focus group." Weiss's time at Into the Gloss had given her something similar. "She had been sitting in bathrooms since 2010, listening to women talk about products," Meltzer writes. "What if a beauty brand did that?" The community fostered by Into the Gloss converted readily into customers.

Glossier, pronounced like "dossier," débuted in October, 2014, with a collection of four products: Priming Moisturizer, Balm Dotcom (a salve), Soothing Face Mist (a rose-water spray), and Perfecting Skin Tint (a sheer foundation). The company made an immediate splash, despite its wares being—as Meltzer recalls thinking at the time—a little underwhelming. What Glossier had in place of distinctive products was a distinctive brand. This encompassed cute packaging but also an attitude. "Skin first, makeup second, smile always" was one company tagline; "You look good" was another. Glossier sold the fantasy of *You but better*, *effortlessly*. If posting to Instagram was a matter of pretending that a camera happened to catch you living a beautiful life, Glossier was the makeup to match.

Glossier's positivity owed something to Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, which began in 2005 and used pointedly imperfect "real" women instead of models. "A new definition of beauty will free women from self-doubt and encourage them to embrace their real beauty," Dove wrote in a statement accompanying the ads. But, where Dove was earnest, Glossier was playful and stylish, and its style owed much to Clinique, a brand that the Estée Lauder company introduced in 1968. Its saleswomen wore fresh white lab coats, and its packages were a vernal pale green. (Carol Phillips, a former *Vogue* editor hired to run the brand, sent notes in Clinique-green ink.) The stark, elegant product photographs that Irving Penn shot for Clinique in its early years appeared in Glossier's internal file of inspiration images, Meltzer writes.



The "Glossier Girl" was conjured through the magic of social media. The brand cast models from Instagram—Glossier staffers, in their pursuit of faces that were both sufficiently "real" and sufficiently beautiful, learned to browse the photos in which a user was tagged, rather than the ones she posted of herself. The look that came to be associated with the brand included full, natural brows, flushed cheeks, and shiny skin. Fans tagged the brand in their flushed, shiny selfies; they tagged the muted pale pink of its branding ("#glossierpink") in photos of sunsets or rose quartz. As the line expanded, names for products—such as Haloscope, a highlighter, or Boy Brow, a pomade—were chosen with hashtags in mind. The brick-and-mortar stores Glossier began opening were designed to be photographed and posted on Instagram.

"The user was the ad," Meltzer writes. "Glossier crowdsourced so much of its imagery that they elevated their eager customer base to the (unpaid) position of campaign face." Countless "shelfies" (Top Shelf selfies) documented users' fondness for their purchases. At one point, the company experimented with using particularly enthusiastic customers as sales representatives—trying to make the Glossier Girl "the new, extremely online Avon Lady," as Meltzer puts it. But the program was short-lived, and customers appeared perfectly happy to promote Glossier free of compensation. Even on Glossier's own Instagram profile, commerce remained oblique. "Their page was never product, product, product," Eva Chen, a magazine editor who left Condé Nast to become Instagram's director of fashion partnerships, tells Meltzer. Instead, it was nineties fashion shoots, puppies, beautiful bathrooms—and lots of pink.

Glossier's signature color transcended the brand; it came to be associated with Instagram as a whole. "Instagram favored a hyper-aspirational aesthetic," Lorenz writes, describing the style that by 2017 dominated the app. "This aesthetic was defined by one color: Millennial pink. . . . Millennial-pink everything, all with a carefully staged, color-corrected, glossy-looking aesthetic." What started as a breezy alternative to conventional fashion imagery had developed codes of its own. Barefaced beauty meant less pressure to apply makeup and more pressure to look good without any. A former Glossier employee tells Meltzer, "They are selling a concealer for people who don't have pimples."

Weiss herself was not exempt from the strenuous discipline of "effortlessness." In 2016, she got married (briefly, to the photographer Diego Dueñas) and wrote a post for Into the Gloss describing her pre-wedding beauty regimen: a months-long process that included a cleanse, a trainer, colonics, microcurrent facials, and eyelash extensions. At the end of all this, Weiss wrote, "I was 8/10 happy with how I looked . . . pretty good!" This was not so long after a Glossier ad told customers, "Brush your teeth, brush your brows, and then maybe brush your hair."

Glossier was reaching the height of its success at what Lorenz identifies as "the Instagram aesthetic's saturation point." As the end of the decade approached, she says, "the gap between influencers' super-professional posts and the everyday lives of most users grew too large." The result was an appetite for more assertive flavors of online authenticity. Low-quality photos became a Gen Z fetish; messiness and "relatable" imperfection characterized the preferred social-media self-presentation of an audience that was coming into its

buying power as Weiss's cohort aged into retinol.

"If there was anyone who embodied this shift, it was Emma Chamberlain," Lorenz writes. In a 2017 YouTube video that became her first hit, Chamberlain sits in her suburban bedroom with acne on her forehead and unpacks a bag of junk she's just bought at the dollar store, rhapsodizing over her purchases—a "fashion scarf," a recorder, "Frozen" Q-Tips—with facetious intensity. (Products as punch line: a sort of anti-Top Shelf.) "Nothing about Chamberlain's videos looked 'premium,'" Lorenz notes, "premium" being the grade of content traditionally desirable to advertisers. But the fashion industry embraced Chamberlain just as it had embraced fashion bloggers a decade before. Chamberlain now holds sponsorship deals with Louis Vuitton and Cartier, and, for the past several years, has served as *Vogue's* red-carpet correspondent at the Met Gala.

The change in aesthetics coincided with a change in business practices. In 2017, the Federal Trade Commission sent letters to more than ninety Instagram influencers and marketers, seeking to "educate" them on their obligation to make "clear and conspicuous" disclosures of any payments or other material benefits provided in return for posts. The prospect of an F.T.C. crackdown seemed like an existential threat. "The whole point of sponsored content was to make it not look like an ad," Lorenz writes. "Creators worried that revealing which brands were paying them would kill their authenticity, repelling their audience."

There turned out to be nothing to worry about. Instagram implemented "Paid Partnership" labels, influencers added "#ad" to their hashtags, and followers were unperturbed. In some cases, engagement with sponsored posts appeared to increase. Influencers were emboldened: they took on more brand deals than ever. The no-makeup-makeup style of Instagram advertising—tastefully minimal, ideally undetectable—appeared obsolete. Now advertising could announce itself and did, sometimes even when technically nothing was being advertised. "By 2018, a brand deal had become a status symbol," Lorenz writes. As one fifteen-year-old tells her, "People pretend to have brand deals to seem cool." Aspiring influencers began posting fake sponsored content with captions in the now familiar cadence of social-media campaigns, complete with the label "#ad." Brands like Glossier had strived to post like people; now people strove to post like brands.

In the introduction to "Glossy," Meltzer describes a former Glossier employee worrying that the existence of a book about the company "implies a cooling-down of some nature." The book's subtitle—"Ambition, Beauty, and the Inside Story of Emily Weiss's Glossier"—dangles the possibility of scandalous revelation. But the story it contains is less an exposé than a record of a passing Zeitgeist. Glossier has weathered its share of criticism, much of it enabled by the same social-media channels the company used so adroitly. In 2019, Glossier's ill-fated Play line of color cosmetics inspired customer complaints for including non-biodegradable glitter. In 2020, an Instagram account called Outta the Gloss started sharing stories from former retail employees about the company's shortcomings in racial equity and working conditions.

And yet Glossier carries on. In February, Sephora began stocking Glossier products. Wholesale was a development Weiss long resisted, because it meant giving up control of the customer experience—but it also put Glossier within easy reach of its customers, of whom many remain.

Meltzer, who previously profiled Weiss for *Wired* and *Vanity Fair*, serves as an authoritative guide to Glossier's industry context and an astute analyst of the brand's appeal. But the woman at the center of her story has always been guarded in her dealings with the press, and she gives the book only wary participation. The narrative is sprinkled with acknowledgments of subjects Weiss resisted discussing. The world of "Extremely Online"—in which the desire to command attention is the basis for entrepreneurship—is one in which Weiss both does and doesn't belong. In Lorenz's telling, reality television represents a threshold, a cultural phenomenon that enabled social media's era of commodified personality. Weiss experienced this threshold firsthand and turned away.

Despite a fondness for tech-founder posturing and talk of innovation, Weiss appears in Meltzer's portrait as a creature of media's ancien régime, with her print connections and her exquisitely controlled bearing. The subtlety of her commercial strategy stands in contrast to the methods adopted by the denizens of "Extremely Online." The founder of Fanjoy, a startup that produces merchandise for YouTubers, tells Lorenz that his clientele takes a "radically different" approach to selling products compared with "older, more traditional stars." For example, Jake Paul (of Vine and, later, YouTube) recorded a holiday song called "All I Want for Christmas"; its chorus went, "Buy dat merch, buy dat merch, buy dat merch, buy dat merch, buy dat merch, buy dat merch, buy dat merch."

"Glossy" and "Extremely Online" seem at times to adopt the habitual postures of their subjects' milieus. Meltzer, as she negotiates Weiss's reticence, shows a touch of the traditional women's magazines' sense of deference. "I was genuinely wondering if I was—and continue to be—to put it bluntly, a complete asshole for writing this book and for putting this woman I respect through such anxiety and turmoil," Meltzer frets at one point. The default register of Lorenz's book, meanwhile, is promotional—the language of press releases and marketing copy. An event is not merely the first but the "first ever"; newly reported information is a "shocking reveal." An influencer posts photos of herself in outfits "featuring trendy garments and must-have accessories." The "creators" who are Lorenz's subjects make up "an unprecedentedly innovative community."

"Extremely Online" closes with an exhortation to follow where those creators have led, issued by a writer who has taken up the cause of brand-building. "We should heed the lessons of the first twenty years of online life, and reflect those learnings in our work to build a better internet," Lorenz writes. "In this we must all be creators, influencing the online world we inhabit."

Plenty are willing. In a 2019 Morning Consult poll of people between the ages of thirteen and thirty-eight, eighty-six per cent of respondents said they would promote a product on their social-media channels for money, with twenty per cent saying that they'd do so even if they did not like the product in question. Eight-eighty per cent, meanwhile, said they valued influencers for that elusive quality: their authenticity. ♦



BOOKS

CONCEALED CARRY

What's really in your pocket?

BY HUA HSU

Many years ago, I was deliberating over a purchase. I was in my early twenties, deeply susceptible to clothing that spoke to Y2K anxiety. Think North Face-adjacent activewear for people who largely avoid physical exertion. The piece in question was a hooded gray jacket; although it lacked any of the futuristic, weatherproof materials prized by people who actually go outside, I was drawn to all the pockets—a festival of zippers, Velcro flaps, and mesh webbing. There was an interior pocket the size of a wallet, and one perfect for a pack of cigarettes. There were roomy, quilted slash pockets along the side that were ample enough for gloves or a Discman—this was the early two-thousands—and two generous chest pockets with Velcro enclosures. I checked one of them, and realized it was detachable, with a series of built-in microfibre dividers inside. The pocket was really a slim CD wallet. I was sold.

Many of us have bought items of clothing simply because of clever pockets—for me, a pair of jeans with a hidden compartment the size of a dime bag along the seam of the inner thigh is particularly memorable. But is this pocket preoccupation purely a matter of pragmatism or does it reflect some deeper psychological need?

From CDs to seeds, coins, beads: human beings have always carried things with them, and for much of our history a satchel worn around the neck, or a pouch attached at the waist, sufficed. In medieval times, men and women alike wore small bags tied to their waist or suspended by belts. For privacy, people layered clothing over these bags, cutting slits to provide easy access to their possessions. And then, at some point in the sixteenth century, European men began asking their tailors for pockets.

Nobody's quite sure why. As Hannah Carlson writes in her delightfully wide-ranging "Pockets: An Intimate History of How We Keep Things Close" (Algonquin), there is no definitive starting point for pockets, no recorded epiphanies. A popular theory is that men, noticing the amount of padding necessary to properly plump their breeches, began using this space for storing small items instead. (There is speculation that some truly imaginative men used their codpieces this way, too.) The distinction between an inset pocket, sewn into a garment, and a small pouch worn at the waist doesn't seem all that radical. They both provide storage close to the body. And yet their introduction shaped attitudes over the past five hundred years around privacy and decorum, gender and empire, what it means to be cool or simply ready for wherever the day may take us. There's no single history of the emergence of the pocket, but there is a striking history of people trying to deny others the privilege of its use.

As practical as they are, pockets offer a sense of mystery. "Once the wearer places something inside their pocket," Carlson writes, "that thing disappears, enfolded and seemingly absorbed into uncertain depths."

What's in your pockets? Maybe it's something mundane: a shopping list, a handkerchief, a small bottle of hand sanitizer. In nineteenth-century England, tailors would place old halfpennies in the pockets of a man's new suit for good luck. Some people believe that carrying a lemon in your pocket wards off negative energy. Thomas Jefferson was known to carry in his pockets a thermometer, a surveying compass, a level, writing instruments, a mini globe, and a notebook. Theodore Roosevelt is said to have survived a 1912 assassination attempt because a fifty-page speech folded in half and a metal glasses

Pockets can suggest possession, plenitude, perversion, and privacy.

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

case in his breast pocket slowed the bullet. Barack Obama once said in an interview that he always kept a lucky charm on him, drawn from a bowl of small souvenirs given to him by people he had met while campaigning. That day, he emptied his pockets to reveal an entirely random sampling of items representing the world's religions, along with a poker chip given to him by a swing-state biker.

Maybe what you're hiding is your own anxiety. "Pockets give you something to do with your hands," Carlson writes, and "that can be a boon when you find yourself at some gathering and realize that your hands are likely to betray your nervousness." Symbolically, many of us aspire after pockets that are fat, not flat. Yet a bulging pocket quickly tips toward the unsightly—the outline of an iPhone in a pair of skinny jeans—or even the concupiscent. "Is that a gun in your pocket," Mae West asked in "Sextette," "or are you just happy to see me?"

Actual firearms are what caused one of the first panics associated with pockets. The emergence of the wheel-lock pistol, in the early sixteenth century, reduced the size of firearms to something that could be easily concealed. These new "pocket dags," and the fact that they could be "carried privily," vexed the British monarchy. In 1579, a regulation was enacted banning guns "that may be hid in a Pocket, or like Place about a Man's Body, to be hid or carried covertly." Although the French were also worried about concealed firearms, their approach to gun control was halfhearted. In 1564, Henri III limited the amount of padding within men's trunk hose and banned pockets of a certain size. (In the late-nineteenth-century United States, state legislatures considered banning the new back or seat pockets on men's trousers for similar reasons, calling them "pistol pockets.")

A more ambient fear was that pockets, as the poet Harold Nemerov once remarked, "locate to lust." Carlson cites etiquette manuals of the eighteenth century that cautioned against men keeping their hands in their pockets as something only "vulgar Boys" did. Caricaturists in England poked fun at the hordes of young people standing about coolly with their hands in their pockets. Carlson suggests that this new pose became an expression of "freedom from social obligations and restraint," as men ignored "the imperative to be polite."

The publication of Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," in 1855, popularized this burgeoning attitude. At a time when serious authors preferred to depict themselves with tailored clothing, impeccable posture, and an air of serious joylessness, the frontispiece of Whitman's book featured a portrait of the author that many found provocative. "Rather than stand upright, Whitman tips hat, eyebrow, and hips at a similar rakish angle, letting his weight fall unevenly," Carlson writes. He's wearing simple canvas trousers and a collared shirt. One arm is held akimbo, while the opposite hand is in his pocket. A reviewer concluded that the man and his book were both "rough, uncouth, vulgar," and Whitman later recalled the "great fire of criticism" invoked by this portrait. For Carlson, who is particularly winning when she's interpreting body language, Whitman's stance is one of "glorious hostility." Not showing one's hands, she argues, could be read as closing oneself off from another, suggesting an attitude of "emotional inaccessibility or disengagement." One seems too cool to care, too self-possessed to bother extending a hand.

In an 1894 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, a writer compared the pockets available to the various members of her household. "I frequently am minus even one," she wrote, while her husband had fourteen. Her daughter had three while her son had seven, "crammed to bursting with odds and ends." The boy's pockets "are his certificate of empire," she proclaimed. "Standing with hands in pockets, the miniature man surveys his little world with the port of a conqueror. All through life he will carry the sceptre of dominion by right of his pockets, in which, whatever his degree, he will carry the sinews of war."

It's a sign of how casually entrenched male privilege is that I never understood how good I've had it. I was largely ignorant of the issue of "pocket equality"; I had never uttered or heard the phrase "*It. Has. Pockets.*" A study from a few years ago suggested that the pockets in women's jeans are about forty-eight per cent shorter and 6.5 per cent narrower than those found in men's jeans. Only ten per cent of women's jeans can even fit a female hand. Sixty per cent of women's pockets can't fit the iPhone X. And that's if you have pockets at all. Many women's slacks, dresses, and blazers are still manufactured with fake, decorative pockets. It's one of the animating questions of Carlson's book, and these sections traffic in fiery consternation: "Why is it that men's clothes are full of integrated, sewn-in pockets, while women's have so few?"

While men's pockets evolved from breeches and gained popularity with trousers, women's clothing took much longer to adapt. In seventeen-nineties England, the reticule, a pouch usually carried on the wrist, provided some relief. (Previously, women would have to reach inside their petticoats to access bags worn beneath the clothes.) But reticules were often small, fitting little more than a few coins, reflecting the fact that women were prohibited from owning very much in those days. Over time, this state of men and women being "differently pocketed" took on a narrative dimension. Men had pockets because they were engaged in important work; women were discouraged not just from working but from coveting pockets, because what would they do with them anyway? What might happen "if women *did* make use of perfectly functional pockets?" One nineteenth-century tailor was quoted as saying, "Not all of them want to carry a revolver but a large percentage do and make no 'bones' about saying so."

Pockets—and their association with men's clothing—attended anxieties over women entering public space. "The more women could carry, the more freedom they potentially had to act," Carlson writes. In 1881, the Rational Dress Society was founded, in London, to lobby against needlessly constrictive clothing and in favor of styles that were more functional, utilitarian, and better for health, like divided skirts. In the early twentieth century, the suffragette movement tied the politics of voting rights with other forms of mobility. The 1910 introduction of the "suffragette suit"—a precursor to the pants suit—was a turning point in the possibility of women's dress. "PLENTY OF POCKETS IN SUFFRAGETTE SUIT," a New York *Times* headline proclaimed.

In 1915, the writer Alice Duer Miller published "Are Women People?," a collection of satirical poems that had appeared in the New York *Tribune*. One of her poems, lampooning the backlash against suffragettes and their quest for

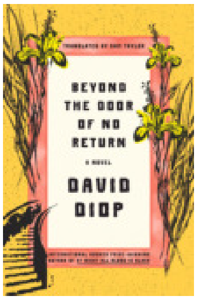
“pocket equality,” was titled “Why We Oppose Pockets for Women.” The reasons range from domestic tranquillity—a man would not be able to exhibit chivalry “if he did not have to carry all her things in his pocket”—to the fact that men used their pockets to carry far more important things than women ever would, such as tobacco, whiskey flasks, chewing gum, and “compromising letters.”

In the late nineteen-thirties, Diana Vreeland, then a fashion editor at *Harper’s Bazaar*, proposed an entire issue of the magazine “just showing what you can do with pockets.” She had grown tired of handbags and wanted to encourage designers to experiment with pockets that could be both functional and “rather chic.” In response, Claire McCardell designed the “pop over,” a stylish, modern take on the frumpy housedress which featured a large, off-center patch pocket. In the fifties, the designer Bonnie Cashin patented the hands-free purse-pocket, which became a signature feature of her coats and skirts. One of her iconic pieces was a raincoat with an appliquéd strap connected to a roomy pocket along the side, mimicking the look of a shoulder bag.

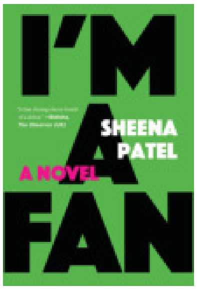
Not everyone embraced these changes. In 1954, Christian Dior observed, “Men have pockets to keep things in, women for decoration.” Dior had little interest in their utility; he saw the pocket as an opportunity for aesthetic experimentation. Some were pointy and “whisked out beyond the shoulders,” Carlson notes; others “flopped high over the breasts rather disconcertingly.” Few could carry much more than a handkerchief.

One of the reasons that women’s pockets never fully evolved was the prevailing sense that women didn’t need them, since they already had handbags. This explains why Vreeland met resistance at *Harper’s Bazaar*—why jeopardize a business relationship with the entire handbag industry? During the Second World War, when thousands of women volunteered for the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps, they were given uniforms that lacked the pockets of their male counterparts’. Their skirts lacked them altogether, while, Carlson explains, “working breast pockets in the women’s coats were judged to be unsuitable, an embarrassment that upset the delicate balance between correct military appearance and femininity.” Instead, a recruitment poster

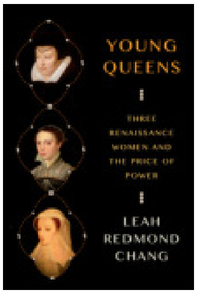
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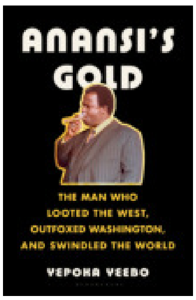
Beyond the Door of No Return, *by David Diop, translated from the French by Sam Taylor (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This metafictional historical novel centers on the recollections of an eighteenth-century French botanist, whose voyage to Senegal is irrevocably altered by his fascination with a young woman who has escaped from a slave ship. His account—gleaned from notebooks discovered by his daughter—begins as a travelogue and then transforms into a record of the escapee’s ordeal, which she recounts to the botanist in the course of one long night: a mesmerizing tale of capture, getaway, and revenge. Diop’s novel, which culminates in a terrifying sequence of events, is a testament to fiction’s ability to uncover our self-deceptions, leaving them “as if exposed to the African sun at its zenith.”



I’m a Fan, *by Sheena Patel (Graywolf)*. The corrosive logic of one-sided relationships is the subject of this dryly funny polemical novel, told from the perspective of a young woman obsessed with her married lover and his ex-girlfriend. The narrator provokes the lover in various ways, in the hope that he’ll end his other love affairs, despite her being aware of her delusion. Surveilling the ex-girlfriend on Instagram, the narrator reacts to the woman’s expensive purchases, which she broadcasts to a sizable following, with a mixture of loathing and desire. This woman “lives with real life art that I can’t afford and wouldn’t know how to get,” she thinks, “and I put posters up with Blu Tack like I’m still fifteen years old. Like a fan.”



Young Queens, *by Leah Redmond Chang (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. In this triple biography, the dynamics of Renaissance Europe are illustrated through the lives and the politically motivated marriages of Catherine de’ Medici, Elisabeth de Valois, and Mary, Queen of Scots. Catherine, who married into the French royal family, leveraged her maternal qualities to win the right to govern on behalf of her young sons. Her daughter Elisabeth married Philip II of Spain to seal an unsteady peace between their two countries. Mary’s strongest loyalty was to her French relatives—leading her to underestimate a dissatisfied Scottish nobility. In an era of empire-hungry monarchs and religious violence, these women, while fulfilling their obligations as wives and mothers, forged diplomatic connections through family ties.



Anansi’s Gold, *by Yepoka Yeebo (Bloomsbury)*. For two decades, beginning in the late nineteen-sixties, a Ghanaian man named John Ackah Blay-Miezah carried out an astonishingly successful scam by pretending to have inherited billions of dollars from Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first President. Though the inheritance was a fiction, propped up by forged documents and opportunistic coöperators looking to capitalize on political instability, Blay-Miezah swindled his marks out of millions by convincing them that he needed money to access the fund, and used his newfound wealth to become one of the country’s most powerful people. Yeebo, a journalist, skillfully interweaves archival material, F.B.I. records, and interviews to recount the saga of the con man’s career, and to reflect on how lies can be leveraged in the creation of national histories.

for the W.A.A.C. featured a battalion of women marching in lockstep, their leader with a handbag slung across her shoulder.

Barbs about the size and contents of women's handbags—in 1957, Joyce Brothers ventured that stuffing one's purse was the sign of a "compulsive worrier"—have long belied the fact that they fulfill a need ill-served by women's clothing. Yet even though a purse can feel as intimate as a man's pocket, it doesn't enjoy the same legal protection. In 1999, the Supreme Court heard the case of Wyoming v. Houghton, and reviewed the argument that a search of a woman's purse during a routine traffic stop was unconstitutional. Antonin Scalia, writing for the majority, argued that searching a purse no more encroached on an individual's privacy than searching a briefcase or a knapsack, denying, Carlson says, "the societal understanding that a purse is as private as a billfold carried in one's pocket." Not only were women denied the privilege of functional pockets; they couldn't enjoy the privacy they afforded, either.

In 1998, Massimo Osti, the Italian designer and streetwear visionary famed for his labels C. P. Company and Stone Island, collaborated with Dockers on a new line. Jackets and sneakers were already future-facing—why not pants? Osti's designs, which he called "equipment for legs," updated Dockers (synonymous then and now with a kind of normie resignation) for new, uncertain times. A Dockers executive explained, "We identified a group we called 'nomads' who are constantly on the move, always in taxis or airports and needing to be wired, so we began looking for partners."

Osti's Dockers are now collectibles, and when you look at them online it's remarkable what an aesthetic difference the angle of a pocket makes. His designs feature interior pockets, hidden pockets underneath side cargo pouches, and a Velcro enclosure alongside the entire rear which keeps back pockets safe. Soon after, Levi Strauss asked Osti to design a new line of clothes in the burgeoning field of "wearable technology." In 2000, Levi Strauss and Philips débuted the ICD+ line, which featured jackets with pockets designed to house Philips electronics products, such as a then revolutionary MP3 player. Carlson notes that this collaboration "received an inordinate amount of press but sold poorly."

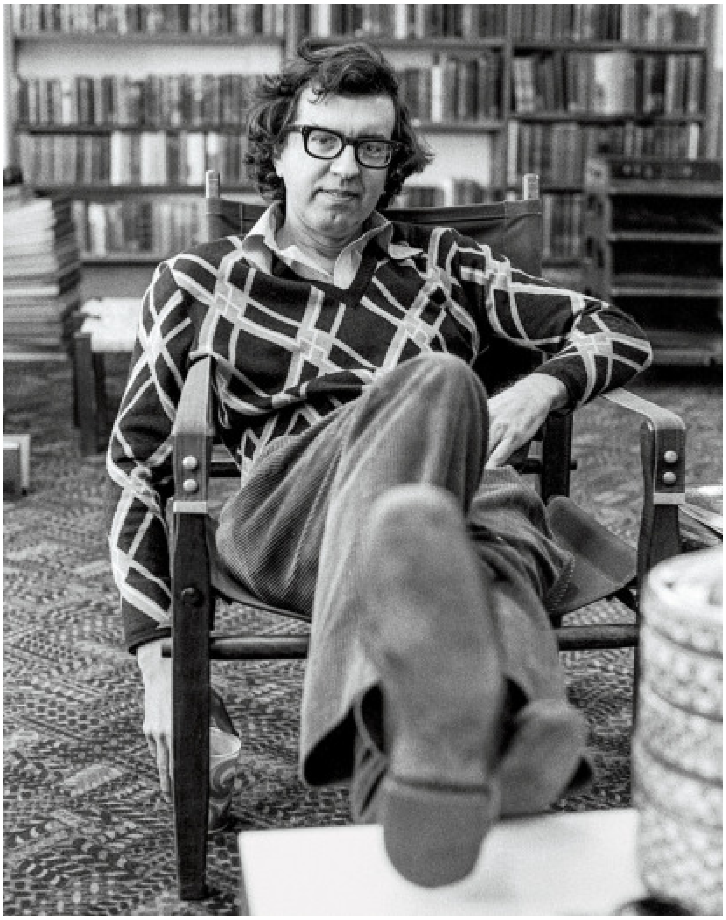
Most of the pockets we covet today grow out of the eighteen-hundreds, with the emergence of large-scale manufacturing and the ready-to-wear industry. The patch pocket—which once marked the laboring classes as unsophisticated and unfashionable—is far more useful than one sized for a watch, a ticket, or a coin. The flittering popularity of cargo pants, fishing vests, or camping gear over the past decade has little to do with their original, intended use. Instead, they signify efficiency and preparedness. The writer James Agee was prescient in romanticizing the aesthetics of workwear, of bright, white seams against dark, indigo denim. In "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," the 1941 book he published with Walker Evans about Depression-era farmers, Agee admired "the complexed seams of utilitarian pockets," the ingenious way a pencil, a ruler, or a watch was never far from hand. He remarked that these men looked as if they were wearing blueprints.

Pockets have always figured in visions of how we might dress in the future. Carlson points to the utopian depictions of advanced societies which always seem to dress humans in flowy, unrestrictive casual wear. In "The Shape of Things to Come," H. G. Wells proposes a future where people wouldn't even need pockets, because they would be free from material desire. "A socialist state would amply provide for each citizen," Carlson writes, "and such support would free people from the impulse to hoard."

Of course, our present is far more complex than what prior generations prophesied. Pockets remain associated with work and productivity, even as the nature of that work or what it means to be prepared for the day changes. The online community that gathers under the banner of Everyday Carry and the hashtag #pocketdump trades tips about the best pens, pry bars, multitools, or knives that all self-respecting people should have in their pocket. Enthusiasts watch one another dramatically emptying their pockets on live streams, assessing the efficiency and quality of what they've curated for that day's carry. (Notably, a smartphone does not count.) I was looking at a Web site selling clothes marketed to devotees of "traditional western culture," and happened upon a page advertising a flowery dress designed for "trad wives"—a reactionary subculture that believes women lived their best lives before the gains of feminism. The description gleefully notes that the dress has pockets, a suggestion that some forms of progress are too great to turn back.

Despite fluctuating fashion trends or archetypal silhouette shapes, we still need to carry things. One moment, it's skinny jeans, which necessitated tote bags, fanny packs, or shoulder slings. The next, we're being told to ditch our bags because of a return to baggy pants and big pockets. The vision of a future free from want and full of pocketless robes seems ever-distant. Instead, many of today's avant-garde clothiers appear to be preoccupied with post-apocalyptic survival, echoing the Japanese designer and artist Kosuke Tsumura, whose nineteen-nineties "survival jackets" featured forty-four pockets capable of turning the disaster-ready garment into a wearable shelter. "Pockets evolved and continue to evolve as clothing and objects do," Carlson writes. "Will we still require pockets in a future in which conductive thread can be woven into one's sleeve and programmed to open locked doors, obviating the need for keys?"

Pockets have been a metaphor for abundance or perversion, possession or secrecy, a way of managing the efficiencies of life. They also index the changing imperatives of our existence, what we felt compelled to carry close to our bodies in different phases of our lives—cigarettes during one phase, a spare pacifier in another. They're where we keep intimate things, like notes or keys, and where we lose things, too. They contain memories: a few dollars that survived multiple wash cycles, a receipt for something you bought years ago, some sand from a long-ago beach trip. Perhaps you've picked up a secondhand jacket or inherited a dress from a relative and come across a ticket stub or an old tube of lip balm: this is your heirloom now. In my closet there's a prized jacket that belonged to a friend who died years ago. One of its many pockets contains an object I can't make sense of: it appears to be a tiny, decorated awl. I take the thing out every now and then to study it, experiencing the intimacy of accessing another's pockets, but I always put it back where it belongs. Was this a lucky trinket or did it serve some mundane purpose? I prefer the mystery of never knowing. ♦



DIANA WALKER / GETTY

BOOKS

TRUE WEST

How Larry McMurtry defined and undermined the idea of Texas.

BY RACHEL MONROE

As a boy, Larry McMurtry rode Polecat, a Shetland pony with a mean streak and a habit of dragging him through mesquite thickets. The family ranch occupied a hard, dry, largely featureless corner of north-central Texas, and was perched on a rise known as Idiot Ridge. McMurtry's three siblings appeared better adapted to their environment—one of his sisters was named rodeo queen; his brother cowboyed for a while—but Larry, the eldest, was afraid of shrubbery, and of poultry. His father, Jeff Mac, ran hundreds of cows, which he knew individually, by their markings; Larry's eyesight was so poor that he had a hard time spotting a herd on the horizon. When his cowboy uncles were young, they sat on the roof of a barn and watched the last cattle drives set out on the long trek north. McMurtry lay under the ranch-house roof and listened to the hum of the highway, as eighteen-wheelers headed toward Fort Worth, Dallas, or beyond—anywhere bigger, and far away. Many years later, the London-born Simon & Schuster editor Michael Korda, a rodeo enthusiast, wore a Stetson and a bolo tie to his first meeting with McMurtry. He was surprised, and perhaps a bit disappointed, to find the young writer dressed "like a graduate student," in slacks and a sports coat. "He did not share my enthusiasm for horses, either," Korda recalled.

By the end, McMurtry was part of the mythology he insisted he was dismantling.

The mismatch between a glamorized West and the grimmer, starker reality was McMurtry's great subject across the dozens of novels, nonfiction books, and screenplays that he wrote or co-wrote before his death, at eighty-four, in 2021, from congestive heart failure. In "Larry McMurtry: A Life," a new biography by Tracy Daugherty, the author of well-received books about Joseph Heller, Joan Didion, and Donald Barthelme, McMurtry emerges as a perpetually ambivalent figure, one who eventually became a part of the mythology that he insisted he was attempting to dismantle.

Although McMurtry spent decades living in Washington, D.C., and Tucson, and wrote books set in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, he was always conscious of himself as a Texas writer. It was an identity imposed from both without and within; some part of McMurtry always remained stuck on Idiot Ridge, looking out toward the horizon. In his early thirties, with a handful of novels to his name, he published an essay condemning the state of Texas letters as woefully backward. More than a decade later, he wrote another, even harsher assessment, claiming that "Texas has produced no major writers or major books." But even McMurtry's repudiations have a funny way of reaffirming Texas chauvinism. ("One must ask: What has Nevada done for literature lately? Who's the Alaskan Tennyson?" Barthelme wrote, for *Texas Monthly*, in an archly mocking response to McMurtry's later essay. "We've done at least as well as Rhode Island, we're pushing Wyoming to the wall.") With "Lonesome Dove," the best-selling cattle-drive epic that won him a Pulitzer in 1986, McMurtry believed that he had written a book "permeated with criticism of the West from start to finish." Instead, it reinvigorated the Western as a genre. Daugherty quotes the late Don Graham, who was a professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin: " 'The Godfather' was supposed to de-mythologize the mob, too, but we all wanted to be gangsters after we saw it, right?"

McMurtry was born in 1936, into a way of life that was already on its way out. Small-scale cattle ranching was a



"Excuse me while I send my partner a telepathic message that I'd like to leave."

• •

dying industry, one that McMurtry missed out on "only by the width of a generation," he wrote, and "as I was growing up, heard the whistle of its departure." His father was a stoic man who thought that ice water was an indulgence; his mother, Hazel, was cripplingly fearful. The family was in thrall to Jeff Mac's parents—among the first white people to settle in Archer County—who seemed to expect subsequent generations to double down on their sacrifice. From a young age, McMurtry sensed that this was a bad bargain. His uncles lived in broken bodies, sustaining themselves on remembered, or imagined, glory days—they were brilliant storytellers but also cautionary tales. Drought, urbanization, and oil were reshaping the Texas economy. Corporate operations were squeezing out small farms, and cowboys were moving to the suburbs. But being a McMurtry meant sticking with an enterprise long after it made sense. One uncle, debilitated by age and hard living, took to tying himself to his horse with baling wire—a "lunatic thing to do considering the roughness of the country and the temperament of most of the horses he rode," McMurtry wrote. Any mourning for a lost era was tempered by McMurtry's understanding that the good old days were never that good to begin with. His characters are often uneasy in the present moment, filled with a longing for something that they can't quite name.

When McMurtry was a second grader, the family moved to Archer City, a one-stoplight town about eighteen miles from the ranch. In high school, he was an officer in the 4-H club, a trombone player in the band, and the third-tallest member of a basketball team that once lost a game 106–4. Even though he grew up in a largely bookless town, "reading very quickly came to seem what I was meant to do," McMurtry wrote. The few books that he got his hands on assumed an almost totemic importance: Grosset & Dunlap pulps, inherited from a cousin going off to war; a truck-flattened history of the Creeks, found in the parking lot of a livestock auction. "I shall almost certainly make some weird combination of writer-rancher-professor out of myself," he wrote in his application essay to North Texas State. He wasn't yet twenty-one years old and had already amassed a library of six hundred volumes. (McMurtry's collecting was not a purely intellectual enterprise; he eventually amassed enough vintage pornography to fill a small room.)

As a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, McMurtry supplemented his stipend by buying and selling used books; meanwhile, his friend and classmate Ken Kesey made extra money being dosed with LSD for scientific experiments. The sixties were kicking up, and McMurtry toggled between working on an anonymous radical publication and writing stories about stolid, repressed cattle ranchers. The youth culture in evidence in his early novels is distinctly Texan and rural (and white): Cadillacs and roughnecks, Hank Williams songs on the jukebox at the pool hall, aimless drives down empty streets. In McMurtry's depictions of small-town America in the fifties, there's little to be nostalgic for, apart from the jukeboxes—life is cramped and strangled, suffused with boredom that threatens to tip into menace. Violent impulses are enacted on women, animals, and weaker boys. In "The Last Picture Show," from 1966, teen-agers gleefully rape a "skinny, quivering" blind heifer whose "frightened breath raised little puffs of dust from the sandy lot." "To Mom and Daddy," McMurtry wrote in a copy of the novel he sent to his parents. "You probably won't like it. Love, Larry."

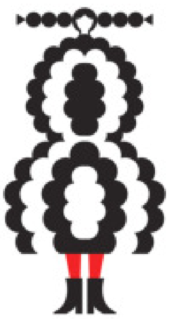
McMurtry's novels translated well to the movies, where the sweep of the settings helped to mute the stories' cynicism. His first novel, "Horseman, Pass By" became "Hud," starring a callous, smoldering Paul Newman; "The Last Picture Show," according to Daugherty, sold nine hundred copies in hardcover upon its initial printing, but Peter Bogdanovich's 1971 film became an immediate sensation, winning two Oscars. (The heifer-rape scene did not make it

into the movie.) McMurtry's home town was already wary of him, and the scandal-plagued filming of "The Last Picture Show" didn't improve his local reputation. (Bogdanovich's marriage to his wife and collaborator, Polly Platt, collapsed after he began an on-set affair with the film's twenty-year-old star, Cybill Shepherd.) The *Archer County News* ran an angry letter about "the further degradation and decay of the morals and attitudes we foist upon our youth in this county"; according to Daugherty, McMurtry, incensed by such attacks, responded by challenging his fellow-citizens to a public debate about the town's true nature. Around that time, he decided that the future of Texas, and Texas writing, was urban, and he went on to write a suite of novels featuring graduate students, entertaining but uneven books that swing from slapstick to pathos. McMurtry was particularly good at capturing the charms of Houston—steamy, dank, violent, fun.

When Daugherty told the art critic Dave Hickey that he was writing a book about McMurtry, Hickey replied, "Knowing Larry, it's going to be a real episodic book." McMurtry was an inveterate road tripper who collected friends like he collected books, and Daugherty's biography is full of entertaining cameos: McMurtry hosts Kesey's bus of zonked-out Merry Pranksters, dines on caviar with Susan Sontag, goes flea-market shopping with Diane Keaton, and attends a state dinner for Prince Charles and Princess Diana hosted by Ronald Reagan. But the anecdotes, many of them drawn from McMurtry's own writing about his life, can feel like a shield. A deeper sense of McMurtry remains elusive throughout the biography; he comes across as a hard man to get to know well. (In "Pastures of the Empty Page: Fellow Writers on the Life and Legacy of Larry McMurtry," edited by the writer George Getschow, the difficulty of approaching and engaging with McMurtry is a recurrent theme.)

McMurtry was often lauded for his skill at writing female characters, which seems to boil down to the simple fact that he found women interesting, and not merely in terms of their relationships with men. In McMurtry's books, characters who don't get what they want tend to have the richest interiority. His female characters, less able to force their environments to conform to their egos, tend to see the world more clearly. In "Terms of Endearment," men are either underwhelming or comic. The novel is more interested in relationships among a constellation of women: Emma Horton, a young mother with unrealized literary ambitions; her friend Patsy; her vexing, charismatic mother, Aurora; and Aurora's put-upon housekeeper, Rosie. When Emma is dying, Aurora and Patsy circle her hospital bed, discussing her children's futures. Flap, Emma's husband, "was there too," but "he was not relevant."

McMurtry once wrote that the women he knew growing up had responded to men's carelessness and indifference by retreating into a "mulish, resigned silence," which he likened to "the muteness of an empty skillet, without resonance and without depth." He emerged from this stifled environment with a real fondness for listening to women talk. After an early marriage and divorce, he embarked on a series of long-running, overlapping, ambiguously intimate friendships with a number of women, including Keaton and the novelist Leslie Marmon Silko; he managed to come away from the filming of "The Last Picture Show" close to both Platt and Shepherd. McMurtry spoke with his female friends regularly on the phone, wrote them letters, brought them flowers, and slept with some of them. Having raised his son, James, more or less on his own, he seemed to have an appreciation for single mothers. "He was, physically, one of the least attractive men imaginable, but as a friend he was everything I wanted," Shepherd wrote in her memoir. "A renaissance cowboy, an earthy intellectual, a Pulitzer Prize winner who could take pleasure in a dive that served two-dollar tacos."



Even as McMurtry urged other Texas writers to root their stories in the present, and in cities—"Why are there still cows to be milked and chickens to be fed in every other Texas book that comes along? When is enough going to be enough?"—he was working on his nineteenth-century cattle-drive epic. "Lonesome Dove" originated as an idea for a screenplay, tossed around by Bogdanovich and McMurtry after the success of "The Last Picture Show." The plan was to cast John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, and Henry Fonda in a story about aging cowboys. "I said it needed to be a trek: They start somewhere, they go somewhere," Bogdanovich recalled, years later. "He said we might as well start at the Rio Grande and go north." One of the characters would be called Augustus, they decided, because they enjoyed imagining how Stewart would pronounce the name. The film never worked out; according to McMurtry, Stewart and Fonda weren't keen on their last cowboy movie being "a dim moral victory."

A decade later, McMurtry repurposed the material into a novel about a group of men, led by the ex-Texas Rangers Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call, who become the first people to drive a herd of cattle from Texas to Montana. The cattle drive proved to be an ideal subject for McMurtry. Though he never seemed much interested in plot architecture, he was an excellent writer of episodes; along the trail, the Hat Creek outfit is beset by locusts, bandits, and all manner of weather. Years earlier, McMurtry's novel "All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers" had portrayed a pair of Texas Rangers as violent buffoons. In "Lonesome Dove," Call and McCrae are essentially noble, if emotionally stunted.

Despite McMurtry's evident affection for the characters, there's a pervasive sense of something sour about their quest. In the novel's first major set piece, the crew carries out a nighttime raid across the Rio Grande into Mexico to steal a herd of horses to take on the northward journey. "Evidently, if you crossed the river to do it, it stopped being a crime and became a game," a teen-age apprentice learns; the more seasoned hands accept the robbery as a matter of course. This initial crime echoes a more shameful and consequential theft that reverberates throughout the novel: white settlers'

expropriation of the Great Plains and the attempted eradication of their Indigenous inhabitants. The novel is haunted by the aftereffects of those actions: a small band of starving Native Americans, slaughtering horses for food; an old man with a dirty beard pushing a wheelbarrow of buffalo bones across the high plains. Viewed from the ground, the cattle drive is thrilling, but seen from any greater distance it's devastating. McCrae, the novel's romantic cynic, periodically lays bare what all the episodic heroism has been for: "That's what we done, you know. Kilt the dern Indians so they wouldn't bother the bankers." McMurtry well knew the ecological devastation wrought by the expansion of the cattle industry, and the fact that it contained the seeds of its own collapse. Overgrazing degraded the rangelands, and mesquite and creosote bushes crowded out native grasses. Just a few generations after the events of "Lonesome Dove," McMurtry's father was embroiled in an endless, futile war to eradicate mesquite from his ranch. "We killed the right animal, the buffalo, and brought in the wrong animal, wetland cattle. And it didn't work," McMurtry said in 2010.

"Lonesome Dove" is a deeply ambivalent book, though, to McMurtry's chagrin, it wasn't always recognized as such. Adapted into a beloved 1989 miniseries, starring Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones as McCrae and Call, it further established the ex-Rangers as sentimental heroes. McMurtry began comparing his most popular book to "Gone with the Wind"; he didn't mean it as a compliment. Still, he went on to write sequels and prequels, spinning out an extended universe that was, on the whole, more rote and less complex than the original.

For all his mixed feelings about "Lonesome Dove," McMurtry appreciated the rewards that the book and other projects brought him. "Movie money is just the kind of unreal money I like to spend," he once wrote to his agent. On road trips, in rented Cadillacs, he sent his dirty clothes home via FedEx; he became such a regular at Petrossian, the caviar spot in midtown Manhattan, that the restaurant installed a brass plaque with his name at his favorite table. But his biggest indulgence was books. As independent bookstores across the country closed, McMurtry bought up their stock and moved it to Archer City, where he was busy converting downtown buildings into bookstores. "Leaving a million or so in Archer City is as good a legacy as I can think of for that region and indeed for the West," McMurtry wrote. The town, having endured a major oil bust, was at last ready to embrace its wayward son. Visitors to Archer City could now stay at the Lonesome Dove Inn and pay their respects to a small McMurtry shrine at the Dairy Queen. When Sontag came to visit, she told McMurtry that it seemed as though he was living inside his own theme park.

The final third of Daugherty's book makes for bleak reading. McMurtry had a heart attack in 1991, and quadruple-bypass surgery left him feeling "largely posthumous," as he put it, a condition from which he seems to have never fully recovered. His closest partnership around this time was with Diana Ossana, a Tucson paralegal. Daugherty is never quite able to explain the nature of their relationship—was she his girlfriend, his friend, his writing partner, his manager, or some combination of all four? Whatever their dynamic, Ossana was a key source of support. During the worst of his post-surgery years, a period when McMurtry was suffering from depression, he lived with her. For a while, he still approached writing as if it were farm chores, something to be tackled first thing in the morning, seven days a week, without fail. But after the publication of "Streets of Laredo," in 1993, he stopped. Ossana eventually coaxed him back to the typewriter, and soon she was editing, and sometimes rewriting, his work. In 2011, McMurtry married Faye Kesey, Ken's widow, after a six-week courtship; the couple lived with Ossana, an arrangement that apparently suited everyone well enough.

In 2006, McMurtry and Ossana won the Golden Globe for Best Screenplay for adapting Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain"; McMurtry thanked his typewriter in his acceptance speech. At the Oscars, to which he wore bluejeans and boots, he thanked "all the booksellers of the world." But Archer City never became the literary destination that he'd hoped, and his store, Booked Up, struggled financially. In 2012, McMurtry auctioned off hundreds of thousands of books. "This was his dream, to turn Archer City into a book town," Getschow, a friend of McMurtry's, said at the time. "Now this is the end of the dream. There is just no way around it." McMurtry had followed the family tradition after all, lashing himself to a dying industry and getting his heart broken in the process. After his death, the Texas legislature passed a resolution honoring his memory; two years later, a state representative said that schools "might need to ban 'Lonesome Dove'" for being too sexually explicit.

McMurtry can seem like a figure from another era. He came of age in a literary economy that allowed for the slow building of a career. Until the breakout success of "Lonesome Dove," he described himself, with characteristic understatement, as a "midlist writer" and a "minor regional novelist." (A friend once had those words emblazoned on a T-shirt for him.) He wrote about a Texas that was majority white, with agrarian roots and a preoccupation with its pioneer past. The version of the state which had such a hold on McMurtry, the one he alternately rebelled against and embraced, no longer feels so central—there are plenty of other Texas stories to tell. (For another take on the rollicking nineteenth-century epic, try "Texas: The Great Theft," by Carmen Boullosa.)

Last year, the *Archer County News* reported that Booked Up had been purchased by another Texas celebrity: Chip Gaines, the telegenically scruffy co-star of "Fixer Upper," the home-renovation show that's been credited (or blamed) for the spread of the "farmhouse chic" aesthetic. Gaines, who spent summers as a child in Archer City, said that he and his wife had gone through McMurtry's collection and, with an eye for beautiful bindings, picked out books to be showcased in a new hotel that they're opening in Waco this fall; the fate of the others is unclear, but the couple say that they plan to donate a large portion back to Archer City. Gaines told me that he identified with McMurtry's late-in-life return to small-town Texas. "He chose to go back to his roots, back to simple beginnings," he said. "I just hope I make him proud." ♦



BOOKS

THE MOTHER TRAP

Everyone's talking about "mom rage," but what is it?

BY MERVE EMRE

On September 13, 2019, Minna Dubin, a mother in Berkeley, California, published a brief, confessional essay in the *Times'* parenting section titled "THE RAGE MOTHERS DON'T TALK ABOUT." Under the subtitle—"Mothers are supposed to be patient martyrs, so our rage festers beneath our shame"—there was a photograph, taken from behind, of a woman and a boy of two or three. They sat side by side on a shaded stoop, their arms linked, and seemed to be examining something in a shrub beside them. The boy was shirtless and had a small brown mark in the middle of his back. The top of his head was level with the woman's shoulder. Like many boys of his age, the bottom of his hair had grown longer and thicker than the rest of it, curling into a soft, wide triangle that sloped down his neck. At the moment the photograph was taken, he seemed to be readying himself to pull away—although it was impossible to know for sure.

The photograph, which Dubin supplied, was not in itself remarkable, but it gained a strange pathos from the essay that followed, which began: "The rage lives in my hands, rolls down my fingers clenching to fists. I want to hurt someone. I am tears and fury and violence." These sentences were lurid, shocking in their directness and their extremity. What explained her rage? Her son would not get into the car, or eat the foods that she wanted him to eat, or let her brush his teeth. He bit other children. He ignored her. She yelled at him, threatened him, squeezed his arms, threw him in his crib, and wanted badly to hit him. She ate too many sweets and wandered the house, ashamed and lonely, whispering to stop herself from laying her hands on him: "Don't touch him, don't touch him, don't touch him." But she was reluctant to speak to anyone, even her husband. "Mother rage is not 'appropriate,'" she wrote. "As if mother rage equals a lack of love. As if rage has never shared a border with love." She sensed that her reactions were excessive, but she made no real effort to understand. Understanding was not the point of her essay. The point was to unleash the primal scream of a mother who had regressed—spectacularly, obscenely—into a tantrumming child, not unlike the three-year-old who had spurred her rage in the first place.

The tantrum had its desired effect; immediately, Dubin started to receive messages from mothers around the world. They confided that they, too, struggled with uncontrollable anger and that her story "made them feel less alone," she reported. Her essay went viral when the *Times* republished it, in April, 2020, weeks after the surge in COVID-19 cases prompted many governments to close schools. Parents struggled to work from home and care for their children, who were suddenly underfoot all the time; households everywhere grew isolated yet overcrowded, overstimulated yet bored, and exceedingly agitated. "Between stay-at-home orders, COVID-19 health concerns, financial instability (or fear of it), and police violence against Black people, it is no surprise that mothers are experiencing intensified rage," Dubin wrote, in a follow-up essay that was published in the *Times* on July 6, 2020, with the headline " 'I AM GOING TO PHYSICALLY EXPLODE': MOM RAGE IN A PANDEMIC."

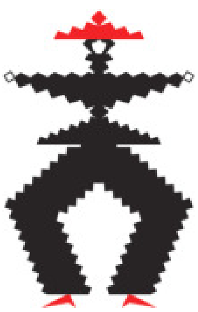
The artlessness of Dubin's essays made them tremendously gripping—so gripping as to deflect certain intellectual and ethical questions that readers might have asked of her central concept, "mom rage." It was a term that Dubin had adapted from a 1998 essay

In Minna Dubin's book, parental frustration acquires a political cast.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARTA MONTEIRO

by Anne Lamott, called "Mother Rage: Theory and Practice." Whereas Lamott's essay was a self-deprecating, mock-scholarly comedy about parenting, Dubin presented mom rage as a solemn social diagnosis. But what was "mom rage," exactly? How did it differ from related diagnoses, such as anger issues or impulse-control disorders? More sensitive questions suggested themselves, too. How reliable was Dubin as a narrator? Did the photograph on the stoop suggest that this tender moment was the prevailing reality of her life, and that her rage was secondary? Or was the rage hiding in plain sight, coursing beneath the surface of even this placid scene? And what about her son? The photograph showed two subjects, an Everymother and an Everychild, but in the essay only one could have a voice. The silence of the child was easy to overlook when the speaker insisted that it was her speech that had been silenced, and that her confession defied a powerful taboo. But who enforced this taboo? In the twenty-first century, in the city of Berkeley, California, who was it that expected a mother like Dubin to "say nothing" about her frustrations or to be "martyr-like" in her behavior?

Melodramas of oppression and resistance do not brook much nuance, and, in any event, it can be difficult to insist on ethical complexity when faced with a story that resonated with many readers. The two essays seeded "mom rage" as a new idiom that parents, psychologists, educators, wellness coaches, bloggers, podcasters, and television personalities increasingly deploy to map the explosive emotional terrain of motherhood. "We Should Be Normalizing Mom Rage" insisted a 2022 headline on the Web site Parents.com, which defined mom rage as "the uncontrollable anger mothers can experience that leads to verbal and/or physical explosions" and attributed it to a "lack of self-care," "little support," and a "raging pandemic." Other commentators were quick to agree: "Mom rage is a real thing"; "Mom rage is real"; "Mom Rage Is Not Your Fault"; "I'm Raging, You're Raging." In the slightly aggressive, slightly insecure posture of these essays, one could detect a plea for legitimacy that doubled as a plea for absolution. A bargain, it seemed, was being negotiated: If we, the readers, could accept the reality of "mom rage" as a phenomenon that originated somewhere outside of, or beyond, the individual's control, then they, the writers, the mothers who yelled and threatened and handled their children roughly, could be freed from their self-doubt and remorse.



"Mom Rage: The Everyday Crisis of Modern Motherhood" (Seal Press, 2023) is Dubin's book-length effort to grant mothers the absolution that many of them seek. "What if the conclusion I, and the moms who were writing to me, had come to—that each of us must be 'the worst mother in the world'—was untrue?" she asks. "What if we were normal mothers reacting to unjust circumstances? What if mom rage were a widespread, culturally-created phenomenon, and not just a personal problem?"

Since around 2016, popular works of American feminist nonfiction have often fallen into two overlapping genres: books that reclaim women's anger for personal and political emancipation ("Rage Becomes Her," "Burn It Down," "Good and Mad," "Eloquent Rage") and books that popularize Marxist feminist analyses of domestic and emotional work as forms of unwaged labor ("Fed Up," "All the Rage," "Essential Labor," "Emotional Labor," "Labor of Love"). The first half of "Mom Rage" squats at the intersection of these genres. The anger of mothers is overdetermined by the "white supremacist, homophobic, classist, ableist, xenophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, capitalist patriarchy," Dubin writes. The capitalist patriarchy props up the ideology of "capital-M Motherhood," which "tells mothers we must throw ourselves full throttle into our mothering job—researching, planning, contacting, scheduling, overseeing, washing, tidying, folding, driving, thanking, inviting, hosting, cooking, preparing, and sharing." Rage is simultaneously "a natural reaction to being systematically stripped of one's power" and a source of "power in its potential for individual and cultural change." The remedies Dubin proposes range from state-subsidized child care to communal parenting, art-making ("I recommend the transformative power of creative practice," she writes), and non-normative sexual arrangements ("I also recommend queerness").

Dubin's claims and prescriptions are, by now, staples of pop-feminist nonfiction. Such personal essays and polemics are built on the foundational arguments of an earlier generation of feminists—among them, Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Selma James—who, in the nineteen-seventies, argued that capitalism's emphasis on waged work outside the home occluded the unwaged work of housewives and mothers. It is a measure of how influential such theorizing has become that this proposition, once radical, is almost received opinion among a new crop of cultural critics. But, by the same token, the newer books—call them "feminish"—engage only sparingly with the original sources. Reading paraphrases of paraphrases of paraphrases, one starts to feel as if there is something a little hollow and shiftless about the ease with which phrases such as "white supremacist, homophobic, classist, ableist, xenophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, capitalist patriarchy" are trotted out. We get the right words, strung together like marquee lights, but not the structural analysis that puts them in relation to one another.

As in Dubin's first essay, much of "Mom Rage" is memoiristic, with long indignant riffs about her experiences living in the Bay Area with her husband, parenting their son (who is now nine) and their five-year-old daughter. Her story is bolstered by the testimony of fifty mothers whom she interviewed for the book and who all "identify as having mom rage." They comprise a racially and economically diverse group—Frannie is a "bisexual Taiwanese Canadian mom of two tweens," Ceci is "a Mexican American paralegal"—but they are troublingly homogenous from a methodological point of view. Dubin does not appear to have interviewed any mothers who do not claim to suffer from mom rage. Nor has she interviewed fathers, rageful or otherwise, a renegade pack of mansplaining, gaslighting, happy-go-lucky ne'er-do-wells. "Fatherhood is a

side gig," she writes. "In Western culture, fathers get to be anything they want." A tiny bit of feminist theory might have complicated this claim—after all, the exploitation of women in the home is bound up with the exploitation of men at work—but it plays little role in "Mom Rage," despite brief cameos by Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. Nor does Dubin consider literature, in which tales of angry, ambivalent, thwarted, and narcissistic mothers constitute a formidable canon of their own, beginning in 431 B.C., with Euripides' Medea and extending to Elena Ferrante's Leda, in "The Lost Daughter," the subject of a recent essay in the Cut (by another mother of two) titled "The Perpetual Rage of Motherhood."

Absent history or culture, every feeling in "Mom Rage" is negotiated on the terrain of power: who has it, who wants it, and who is denied it. Occasionally, power is rooted in a set of concrete practices and institutions, as in Dubin's spirited discussion of hospital-based maternal health care. More often it is an atmospheric phenomenon, a feature of abstract entities, such as "the powers that be (the white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy)," or metaphors, such as "Motherhood's PR team." No doubt the patriarchy and capitalism have power, but how precisely that power results in the rage of mothers toward their children, as opposed to their husbands or their bosses, remains unclear. (The powerlessness of children relative to parents is never considered, but it is the anchor of Lamott's original article: "One reason I think we get so angry mad at our children is because we can. Who else can you talk to like this?") No doubt, too, the ideology of Motherhood is diffuse and compelling; as Dubin points out, more than half of Americans believe children are better off when their mothers do not work outside the home, while only eight per cent believe the same about fathers. But what does it mean to claim that its "ideas are in the water we guzzle every day?" Water does not have any ideas swimming around in it, let alone the ideas filtered in by Motherhood's P.R. team, which, as Dubin acknowledges, also does not quite make sense, either literally or figuratively. "The PR team?" "What even *is* that?" she asks at the end of the chapter devoted to explaining it.



"Since getting a grill, we've been really into burnt food."

The imprecision of Dubin's language strands her argument on unstable ground. Often, one wonders if what is truly at stake for her is not a dramatic political battle between the oppressors and the oppressed but a quieter struggle between personal freedom and unfreedom:

> Pre-motherhood I was slippery, a thousand tiny, silver fish—a woman, a writer, a friend, an educator, a queer person, a performer, a Philly girl, a Bay Area transplant, a wife, a lefty Jew. With nothing to lose, no property, no fancy job, no kids, I was a flight risk. I could do or say anything. But now that I have children, I can't stray too far, mouth off too much. There are children to consider! To feed. To pick up from school. Mothers have obligations, schedules, other people to put first. My name has been erased, and I'm reduced to one role, one thing.

One of the difficulties of being a parent, as Dubin intuits, is that it orients you to others in a knotty, demanding way. There are moments when I fantasize that, one day, my children will ask me the question that Henry James's Isabel Archer asks Madame Merle, the woman who has puppeteered her into making the decisions Isabel believes she has made of her own free will: "What have you to do with me?" To which I would respond, as Madame Merle does, "Everything"—but also, "Nothing." Your child is and is not an extension of yourself. He is both an intimate and a stranger. He imitates you and he rejects you, and it is not always possible to anticipate which gesture is more startling. You can attempt to control what he does, to a point, but you cannot control what the world does to him, or how he responds to it. What we learn from our children is nothing less than our own limitations—our passivity and our susceptibility when faced with what was once a part of us, but is, ultimately, other to us.

From this baffling relationship between self and other there can emerge an ambient feeling of unfreedom. The great responsibility and the great vulnerability of being a parent can be unsettling for one's identity, in the past, present, and future. It can be difficult to recall with any certainty who you were before you spent so much of your time wondering, ruminating, fretting, or catastrophizing about another person. If, like Dubin, you are relatively privileged, you know that you have chosen your unfreedom. Yet you may still feel that you did not choose to bind yourself to these people, these intimate strangers, or to this whole life. By this logic, the entire atmosphere of parenthood, no matter how privileged it may appear from the outside, can come to feel like "a scam," as Dubin puts it. And the decision not to make lunch can seem like the ultimate horizon of liberty.

Acceptance of the fact that parenthood necessitates the relinquishment

of various freedoms would seem to be one of its central features. "Selfish," one of my favorite stories by Lydia Davis, captures this peculiar state by evoking a parent who thinks, "The useful thing about being a selfish person is that when your children get hurt you don't mind so much because you yourself are alright." The story is structured around a painful irony. Its narrator does not tell us that she is a selfish person, only that it would be useful for "you," a parent, to be one. We sense that the narrator is not a selfish person and is not all right when her child gets hurt; that a selfish person would not possess the insight to write these lines in the first place. And we sense, too, that it would be foolish to believe that a parent could simply choose to be a selfish person—that as a state of being it exceeds conscious choice, just as it very likely exceeds all the cultural and social changes that might improve the conditions of mothers. A mother's vulnerability to her children cannot be redistributed with the same exactitude that her work can be. Neither free day care nor a night off from doing the dishes can inure her to how her child's pain can, by shaping his identity, shape hers.

Dubin is not really imagining the freedom to be more than "one thing" but the freedom to run away from this bind and into the arms of nothing—no fixed roles, no lasting responsibilities. This is a negative freedom that does not expand one's sense of self so much as shrink it to pure potentiality. But you cannot live in potentiality forever. If spouses and children do not get in the way, then time will. In its purest and most personal moments, Dubin's rage seems like grief for the future, which is available to her children in a way it will never again be available to her.

Although rage is the passion that gets top billing in the book, it is made to share the stage with another feeling: shame. Shame is simultaneously the cause and the effect of rage. "Society punishes angry women and shames mothers who step out of their domestic box of caregiving," Dubin writes. If the shame of not living up to the ideals of capital-"M" Motherhood causes mothers to rage, then it also causes them to stay silent, lest they articulate a greater and deeper shame: that they really are a "bad mom." "Shame" and its variants appear with greater frequency as "Mom Rage" shifts into its second half, which looks to the genre of self-help to break the "Mom Rage Cycle" and, with it, the "Shame Spiral." "Self-isolation is a key component of the Shame Spiral for me," Dubin writes. "I am so deep in my own sorrow and self-hatred after a rage, I have a hard time reaching out to friends."

Dubin's presupposition is that it is desirable to banish shame from the scene of parenting, and that once we do we may move "toward creating a more equitable and joyful motherhood." But surely this depends on the cause of shame and to what ends shame is, or can be, directed. "Shame is itself a form of communication," the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes. Sedgwick, who was also one of the great theorists of shame, saw the relationship between mother and child as a model for the isolation (and, more surprisingly, the possibility of intimacy) that shame can produce. The hot blush or the averted gaze that arises when a mother shouts at her child are "semaphores of trouble," the outward signs of a breach in their intimacy that has caused them to shrink from each other and into their innermost loneliness. At the same time, these visible responses are invitations for the mother and child to repair their relationship. They can make it anew with an apology or an embrace—and, in doing so, they can make themselves anew, with a deeper understanding of their identities as both linked and separable beings.

Shame is a peculiarly contagious emotion. Like secondhand smoke, it can cling to you from great distances, both literal and metaphoric; consider, for instance, the simultaneous urge to look and to look away that you might feel watching a mother yell at her child in the supermarket, even if the mother and child are completely unknown to you. "One of the strangest features of shame," Sedgwick writes, "is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment *by* someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me can so readily flood me." For Sedgwick, shame's capacity to disrupt our sense of identity, by filling us with feelings on behalf of another person, gives it a potentially political dimension. It can be a spur to altering conditions that are abject, embarrassing, and exploitative—not only for ourselves but for others. Attending to shame within the context of a parent-child relationship offers a model by which we may learn to relate to others by learning to perceive them as both similar to and different from ourselves.

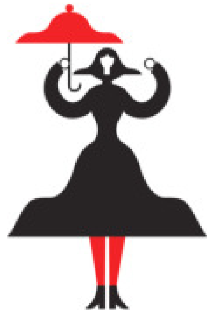
Dubin deliberately foregrounds examples of her treatment of her son that may leave one feeling flooded by shame; when, for instance, he goes limp while they are crossing a busy intersection, and,



"According to my phone, society is on the brink of collapse, but, according to our living room, things seem pretty O.K."

once they reach the other side, she pushes him, causing him to hit his head on the sidewalk. Yet her insistence on not feeling shame short-circuits her acknowledgment of her son's discreteness from her and robs them both of the opportunity to remake their relationship. Indeed, a perplexing lack of intimacy characterizes her descriptions of her son. In her first *Times* essay, he was nonspecific, a typically rambunctious three-year-old boy. "His behavior is age-appropriate," Dubin reassured the reader (and herself). "All kids test limits." In the book, her son has a name, Ollie, and he is no longer the Everychild she previously presented. Dubin introduces him through his diagnoses: a sensory-processing disorder, fine and gross motor delays, food rigidity, and autism-spectrum disorder. Once we learn this, her mom rage reads differently, as the reaction of a parent facing more than run-of-the-mill challenges. Alarmed by Ollie's uncomprehending reactions and emotional blankness—"His silence infuriated me," she writes—she screams and tries to frighten him. Staging these scenes allows her to capture him through his physical responses to her. We learn about his "chubby, tear-streaked face" and the "doughy hugs" he offers to appease his mother. "Between genetics and autism, Ollie never really had a chance," she writes, and, although the sentence is specific to his challenges with potty training, it is difficult not to hear in it a more general lament or judgment.

"Moms of sick, disabled, or neurodivergent kids all have increased stress levels that make them more prone to mom rage," Dubin observes. Such stress cannot be underestimated, but the specificity of Dubin's experience presents a problem for her thesis. Even if we accept her argument that "white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" shapes the conditions of contemporary motherhood in profoundly unjust ways, it is clear that this is not the whole story of her rage. The book fails to universalize a particular predicament, and, in strenuously attempting to do so, turns into an exercise in ill-advised candor. There are times when one wants to shield both Dubin and her son from such exposure, and times, too, when one feels rage toward Seal Press, which should have used better editorial discretion with a first-time author. Aptly enough, the fortunes of Seal Press echo, in a way, the current mainstreaming of feminist theory in nonfiction publishing. Founded by two feminists in a Seattle garage in 1976, it has now, after a sequence of corporate acquisitions, ended up as an imprint of Hachette, one of the world's largest trade publishers, which is apparently happy to pass off the book as a "groundbreaking work of reportage" by dressing it up in the flimsiest fashions of pop feminism.



Whereas the photograph that ran with the essay showed us a nondescript still of tenderness, "Mom Rage" offers close-up footage of unstable moments; of reflexive action and reaction in the exhausting, relentless years of early parenthood; of panic dissolving into rage and shame, yes, but also into fear. "*No. No! This is* NOT *happening again!*," Dubin thinks as she reads a letter from her son's preschool teacher informing her that the school is no longer a good fit for him. A similar emotion surfaces when she sends him to camp: "I could feel every inch of my skin prickle as the counselor spoke and the story of Ollie's behavior unfolded." She is frightened for her son, who must learn to exist in a world in which his well-being means less to everyone else than it does to her. Every parent can understand this.

There are scenes scattered throughout "Mom Rage" when Dubin's gaze widens beyond the mother's point of view. In one of them, Dubin's son and daughter have been tussling over the bathroom door, her on one side of it, him on the other. He pushes too hard, and she falls back and hits her head. Dubin is about to bellow but then stops. Instead, she looks closely at her son: "I recognize regret and sadness in his wet, almond eyes, mirror images of mine. I take a slow breath and see that his heart is just like my heart—full of self-punishment. I open my arms to him and say no words at all." She closes the chapter by describing a piece of scrap paper with two sentences written on it that, for a time, she kept in her purse to remind her of this moment. The first sentence read, "Ollie is a four-year-old boy, and he is good." The second read, "I am a thirty-five-year-old woman, and I am also good."

The mother and child's silent embrace is the ideal image of intimacy renewed. It is the closest Dubin comes in the book to the tender mood of the photograph, and it will soften even readers who have hardened to her extravagant performance. And yet it is difficult to accept it as proof of understanding. At such a pivotal moment, one would expect the language of recognition to be slightly more imaginative and precise, not his eyes are "mirror images of mine" or "his heart is just like my heart." How clearly can a writer see anyone or anything—her children or the social and political contours of motherhood—when she perceives everything through the haze of moral cliché? "*My boy* IS *good!* I wanted to scream. *He's* GOOD!" "*Please* SEE *him! See his good self*," Dubin pleads. It is wrenching to witness how much she needs others to affirm that both she and her son are good, instead of understanding how they can be good to, or good for, each other. And it is unsettling to realize that she is incapable of seeing him or herself clearly—that careless prose can narrow the terrain on which a person encounters others and interrogates her own desires.

Dubin never relinquishes the language of morality. She cannot; her book has promised universal absolution and universal absolution it must deliver. "*You are a good mom*," she assures the reader in the book's last line. But to liberate parents from shame like this is every bit as moralizing an act as scolding them would be. Both acts situate the writer on a plane of judgment above the reader, reducing the reader to an extension of the writer's values. The question "How can she be sure that I am a good mother?" can only be answered with another question: "Does she care who I am?" The writer gets to play out a fantasy of the infinitely benevolent mother by casting the reader in the role of the child, desperate for forgiveness. Yet what the reader really seeks from the writer, and what the child seeks from his mother, is not a moral sentence. It is an ethical point of view—the attentiveness and the curiosity borne of the clear-eyed recognition of both self and others. ♦



THE THEATRE

BODIES AT REST

Annie Baker's "Infinite Life."

BY HELEN SHAW

In "The Antipodes," Annie Baker's deadpan satire from 2017, the playwright, having spent some time writing for television, showed us her version of Hell. It looks a lot like a Los Angeles writers' room, where a table of seven men and one frequently interrupted woman generate plot ideas by relaying intimate anecdotes from their own lives. The entertainment industry's appetite for narrative is bottomless, and, as the writers keep offering up private stories to feed it, the auto-cannibalizing starts to go wrong. A Biblical storm rises outside, and reality cracks open, as it sometimes does in a Baker play, to let the uncanny come through.

Baker's latest comic drama, the much anticipated and pandemic-delayed "Infinite Life," at the Atlantic, is "Antipodes"'s exact opposite: arid where the 2017 play is flooded; featuring mostly women, with a single, token man. It's also a surprisingly sincere, even passionate answer to her earlier horror-satire's question about affliction in art. At a clinic north of San Francisco, patients are fasting to arrest the diseases—cancer, chronic Lyme—that are consuming them. As they starve, their metabolisms slow, and, for some, their symptoms recede. "The Antipodes" and "Infinite Life" are both waypoints in Baker's thinking about suffering, but, for all its references to pain-as-hellfire, "Infinite Life" isn't infernal. Where nothing is fed, nothing can grow, so nothing can die. Mortality is on hold. The clinic is a Purgatory for its patients—but it's also a kind of bizarre Eden.

Five women at a California pain clinic push Pause on life.

Not that it's lush. The word "paradise" is from the Persian for "walled garden," and in James Macdonald's exquisite production, designed by the collective dots, the emphasis is on the wall. A brick patio full of deck chairs has been set against a concrete-block breezeway with a stylized floral pattern—reminiscent of both sixties motels and Moorish courtyards—which is itself set against an adobe wall. We spend much of "Infinite Life" watching five women waiting out their treatments on these lounge chairs. (One might be reminded of the row of seated women in Caryl Churchill's post-apocalyptic "Escaped Alone," from 2016, which was also directed by Macdonald.) They have water bottles, a few books, and the strange, droll clarity that comes after not eating for days. They each have an invisible companion, too—pain so indescribable that they can only really talk about other things.

The forty-seven-year-old Sofi (Christina Kirk, her voice humming with complaint) is on her first day of fasting when the play begins, and is leaving for the airport after her session when the play ends. Since her experience is the play's time frame, she's also in charge of notifying the audience when the clock jumps forward. "Twenty minutes later," Sofi announces, as she slides her eyes toward us; or "Seven hours later," as the lights, designed by Isabella Byrd, snap from near-dark to blazing morning. The other women are all decades older than she is: the knowledgeable veteran Yvette (Mia Katigbak), the fragile Eileen (Marylouise Burke), the wry Ginnie (Kristine Nielsen), and the confident Elaine (Brenda Pressley).

Amid the women's desultory, seemingly aimless chat, leitmotifs emerge, including the involuntary push-pull of the body ("We also have tiny sphincters in our eyes," Ginnie says, in the play's least explicit reference to sphincters), loss as moral instruction (Sofi is reading George Eliot's "Daniel Deronda," though she hasn't reached the part where the heroine matures), and the futility of explaining a feeling, whether pain or desire or fear. Elaine tells a story about trying to stop her husband from yelling at her. They had set-

ILLUSTRATION BY CAMILLE DESCHIENS

tled on a safe word, "chimichanga," for moments she felt terrified of his shouting, but, she tells the group, "I'd say chimichanga and he'd start screaming YOU CAN'T SAY CHIMICHANGA or you know THAT DOESN'T MERIT A CHIMICHANGA."

The older women may have passed through their marital storms, but Sofi is still in the middle of hers. At night, we hear her leaving anguished messages for her husband ("I thought I'd try to tell you what it's like instead of just saying I'm in pain I'm in pain feel bad for me Pete I'm in pain") and dirty messages for someone else. Her furious libido, we realize, is also torturing her. Then the lone guy at the clinic, Nelson (Pete Simpson, doing a very funny imitation of a Silicon Valley optimization bro), ambles onto the patio with his shirt off and stretches out on a chaise longue. Kristine Nielsen, one of our most precise stage comedians, speaks for the group when she drops her voice a shuddering octave: "What were we just talking about?" If there is a Garden, there must also be a temptation.

Baker is in a cohort of adventurous writers, like Anne Washburn and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, who use surface realism to hint at deeper, more ominous currents: the greater part of the world, this school argues, is hidden. What sets Baker's work apart is her dialogue, which wanders as naturally as if she's overhearing it, and her silences, which she has said she counts out rhythmically as she composes. Scholars have written dissertations on Baker's silences, trying to understand the way they shift her theatre toward both greater naturalism (here is the amount of time conversation actually takes) and greater mystery (silences are gaps, and gaps are portals, and weird things sometimes arrive through portals). She also employs silence to insure that her particular comic timing zings, with lulls for anticipatory awkwardness and side-eyed reactions. If performers do speak, it's usually quietly. The audience always gets very still during Baker's plays. If we rustle, we might drown someone out.

I remember thinking, while watching "The Antipodes," that it was going to be terrifying when Baker got serious. Her cool gaze can be so lacerating—what if she turned it on, I don't know, me? Her play "John" was existentially expansive and creepy-gorgeous; she won a Pulitzer for her slow-core masterpiece "The Flick," which hid a moral tragedy inside the real-time tedium of working at a movie theatre. Her work is carefully observed, with an almost religious discipline, and her innovations in shaping stage time have made her one of the most important theatre writers alive. Yet, for all that I've loved her other plays, her amused irony has always kept their sharp edges at a safe distance.

"Infinite Life," however, is a knife without a handle. Baker has said that she wrote it after her own brush with insoluble pain—"I knew I wanted to write a play but all I could write was 'PAIN PAIN PAIN' at the top of a Word document," she said in *Vogue*. Here she communicates the incommunicable not by making us feel physical anguish, obviously, but by loaning us the eerie suspension her characters experience as extreme hunger detaches them from their bodies. The Baker affect lets us drift with them, temporally; we sense time slipping away in unpredictable chunks. She makes us feel their tense stoicism, which is just one sensation removed from feeling their agony.

Oddly, I found that the most unbearable moment in this dry-eyed drama came in the middle, when the narrative perspective briefly shifts from action to meta-commentary. "This is the night you heard me screaming," Eileen says to Sofi, calmly. The line between Sofi and the playwright blurs, especially because the character has been styled to look a lot like Baker—wavy-haired, wearing socks with sandals. Burke's voice trembles and goes thready. "I said no one should ever try to recreate this. This is agony in its purest form. A minute of this is an infinity." Wait, I thought, did Baker actually see a woman fall apart in a clinic somewhere? "I said don't ever tell anyone you saw me like this," Eileen then says to Sofi. "And you said: 'Okay.'" Is Baker telling us that this scene is an invasion of privacy? I'm still not sure. After "The Antipodes," I felt I understood Baker's belief that turning other people's suffering into writing was grotesque. But, in this strange, transfixing scene, I realized I'd got it wrong. Language, like pain, can be an imprecise messenger. ♦









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THE CURRENT CINEMA

THEY CAME BY NIGHT

"A Haunting in Venice" and "El Conde."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Published in 1969, Agatha Christie's "Hallowe'en Party" is largely set in the fictional town of Woodleigh Common, "an ordinary sort of place," thirty or forty miles from London. Thanks to the director Kenneth Branagh and his screenwriter, Michael Green, the book has become a new film, "A Haunting in Venice," and the action has shifted to Italy in 1947. Now, *that's* an adaptation—a bolder metamorphosis than anything essayed by Branagh and Green in "Murder on the Orient Express" (2017) or "Death on the Nile" (2022). I'm already looking forward to their next reworking of Christie: "The Body in the Library," perhaps, relocated to the freezer aisle of a Walmart.

Branagh returns as Hercule Poirot, who has retired to a Venetian fastness. There, ignoring the pleas of the importunate, who bug him with their private mysteries, he tends his garden, inspecting his plants through a magnifying glass as if to expose any guilty aphids. A local heavy named Portfoglio (Riccardo Scamarcio), who sounds like a stockbroker but is actually an ex-cop, functions as a gatekeeper. The one outsider to whom he allows entry is Ariadne Oliver (Tina Fey), a crime novelist on the make. She urges the sleuth to accompany her to a séance, where a celebrated medium, Mrs. Reynolds (Michelle Yeoh), will make contact with the beyond. Ariadne's plan is that Poirot, as an arch-rationalist, will debunk the claims of the paranormal. And Branagh's plan, as a guileful filmmaker, is to rebunk them to the hilt.

Prepare yourself, therefore, for all the tricks. A palazzo, said to be stuffed with ghosts and currently occupied by an operatic soprano, Rowena Drake (Kelly Reilly), who hasn't sung a note since her daughter, Alicia (Rowan Robinson), fell into a canal and drowned. A parrot called Harry, who has kept his beak shut for the same reason. A housekeeper (Camille Cottin) given to speaking in Latin, who alone has access to the daughter's room. A British doctor (Jamie Dornan), traumatized by his wartime experience. A handsome and reliably vacant rotter (Kyle Allen), who was once betrothed to Alicia and jilted her, apparently for money, which seems fair enough to me. A concealed basement, complete with skeletons. A knitted rabbit. Missing bees. A typewriter whose keys depress themselves. A lashing nocturnal storm so wild that, when death descends, the police cannot reach the scene, meaning that Poirot must lock everyone in and—*mon Dieu*—solve the crime before breakfast.

I remember being scared by "Hallowe'en Party" when I read it as a child, because the first victim *was* a child: a girl of twelve or thirteen, whose head was forced down into a bucket of water while she was bobbing for apples. (Christie could be cruel, when she wished, in the matter of fun gone wrong.) As if by way of redemption, the most interesting figure in "A Haunting in Venice" is another kid—Leopold, the doctor's son, played by Jude Hill, who was the rascally tyke at the heart of Branagh's "Belfast" (2021). Here, Hill is scrubbed clean of any cuteness; instead, he presents us with a kind of precocious mini-Poirot, solemnly clad in a dark suit and tie. Leopold cares for his quaking father, reads Edgar Allan Poe, and, asked about his sympathy with the dead, replies, "Some of them are my friends." He and the boy in "The Sixth Sense" (1999) would have plenty to talk about.

For the constitutionally morbid, such as Leopold, nowhere can outgloom Venice. "The most beautiful of tombs," Henry James called it, and I am always bemused by its reputation as a romantic refuge. How can you honeymoon in a city defined by dissolution and decay? Think of Joseph Losey, who took a Hollywood potboiler, James Hadley Chase's "Eve," and, like Branagh, moved the plot to Venice. The result was "Eva" (1962), a memorial to disenchantment, in which Jeanne Moreau, as a heedless hedonist, left her lover with his dignity drenched and his heart in ruins. Part of the film unfolded on Torcello, in winter, far from the dazzle of the Grand Canal.

If every Venetian tale has been told, then, and every view exhaustively documented in print or paint, what can "A Haunting in Venice" hope to add to the mix? It's only a couple of months since Hayley Atwell and Rebecca Ferguson were busy battling a villain on one of the city's bridges in the latest "Mission: Impossible," and, for the Venetian mourning of drowned daughters, there is nothing to rival "Don't Look Now"

Kenneth Branagh directs and stars in the third of his Hercule Poirot films.

ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN GENT

(1973). Yet Branagh's film has the charm of ridiculous excess: stylistic flourishes are piled high into a treasury of gothic camp, and the camera is tilted, regardless of provocation, at the most alarming angles—Dutch angles, as they are known in the trade. If you really want to feel at home, M. Poirot, forget Venice. Onward to Amsterdam!

According to the historical record, Augusto Pinochet, who came to power in Chile after a military coup fifty years ago, was born in 1915 and died in 2006. According to "El Conde," on the other hand, a new movie from the Chilean director Pablo Larraín, Pinochet was around for centuries. He began as Claude Pinoche, a young French officer in the army of Louis XVI, who observed the excesses of the French Revolution at close quarters—so close that, after the execution of Marie Antoinette, he snuck up to the guillotine and licked her blood from the blade. This was no regular brute, you see. He was a vampire.

Such is the conceit that drives this unusual film. Tracking the course of Pinochet's misdeeds, it jumps forward to the modern age, passes swiftly over the span of his dictatorial reign, and alights on his casket as he lies in state. A small window shows the peaceful visage of the deceased, who opens his eyes and steals a glance, clearly impatient to rise again and resume his thirsty trade. Simple blood, we learn, does not satisfy Pinochet's discerning palate; instead, he plucks out his victims' hearts, pops them in a blender, and quaffs the liquidized gloop. Aside from a last-minute coda, "El Conde"—"The Count"—is entirely in black-and-white. The gore is as dark as tar.

The bulk of the story is set on a remote Chilean ranch. The sole occupants are Pinochet (Jaime Vadell), his wife, Lucía Hiriart (Gloria Münchmeyer), and their servant, Fyodor (Alfredo Castro), who takes great pride in the chronicle of his sadism, as meted out during the rule of the junta. To this desolate spot come Pinochet's five children, who profess a feeble strain of love for their father but are mainly after his money. An accountant by the name of Carmencita (Paula Luchsinger) arrives, to sort out the family finances, not least the funds that were stashed away like a squirrel's nuts. Carmencita, however, has a secret plan; she is a nun, in civilian disguise, and her suitcase is filled with the tools of an exorcist. The stakes are high.

Vampires notwithstanding, no one in the movie makes a more striking impact than Luchsinger. Close-cropped, sharp-featured, round-eyed, and beaming, she radiates a militant innocence. Yet her character's purpose becomes perilously blurred, and there is something slack and unfocussed at the core of the plot. The more that Larraín tries to grab your attention with moral grotesquerie, as the Pinochets bicker over the legacy of the undead, the less inclined you are to yield. My suspicion is that "El Conde" is a one-trick tale. The image of a tyrant as an actual bloodsucker, rather than as a harsh subduer of his compatriots, would be meat and drink—especially drink—to a political cartoonist, but it has no narrative force to match its satirical bite. Few jokes, no matter how sick and strong, can be told over and over without beginning to fade.

The film is narrated in the unmistakable tones of Margaret Thatcher (Stella Gonet), who deigns to make a guest appearance in the later stages. It is true that, after Pinochet was indicted for human-rights violations in 1998, and held under house arrest in Britain, Thatcher (and George H. W. Bush) argued that he should be released. Anyone watching "El Conde," though, and knowing little of that period, will be left with the impression that she was not so much Pinochet's ally as his monstrous mate—even, perhaps, his superior—with savage tastes of her own. Like him, she flies serenely through vast gray skies, her cape spread out in a bat's wing. Being a lady, she sips blood from a china cup, as if it were Earl Grey tea.

The fact that Thatcher, unlike Pinochet, was fairly elected, and that she governed a country in which you could call the Prime Minister a vampire without getting thrown out of a helicopter or beaten to a pulp, may be too fine and too dull a distinction to trouble Larraín. His is a curious case: his work has grown sillier, not wiser, in his maturity. The baroque paranoia of "Jackie" (2016), "Spencer" (2021), and "El Conde," bulging with nightmares of conspiracy, is less persuasive than the urgency of "NO" (2012). That was Larraín's best film, firmly grounded in the campaign to defeat Pinochet in a referendum of 1988, and peopled with ordinary Chileans who had endured more than enough and gathered themselves to hit back. Where are such folk in "El Conde"? Who needs a movie that is almost all predators, with barely a word from their prey? ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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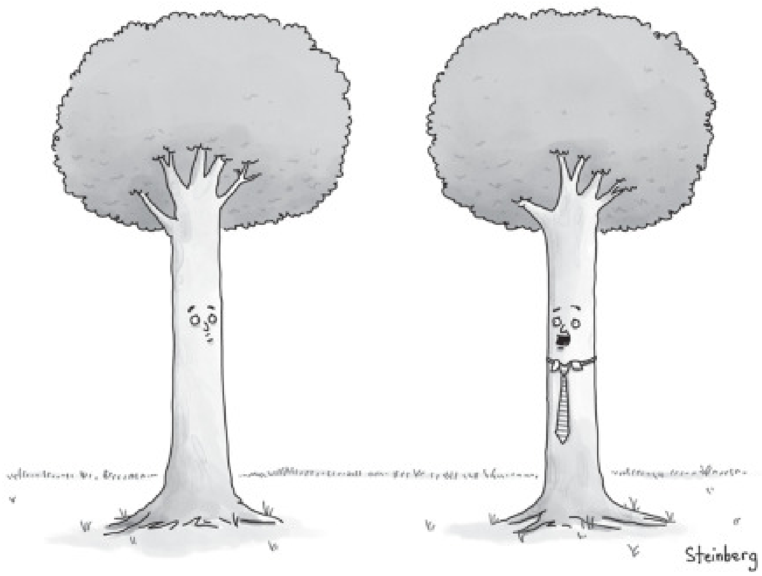
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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Avi Steinberg, must be received by Sunday, September 24th. The finalists in the September 11th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 9th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



"Oh, no. An even scarier vacuum."
Jessica Misener, Ann Arbor, Mich.

"It's a place where a massive object has collapsed and created a region where the gravity is so intense that not even light can escape. It's called a cat's soul."
Rick Rose, Chicago, Ill.

"It's moments like this that I'm reminded just how insignificant my owner is."
Joe Wieder, Brooklyn, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION

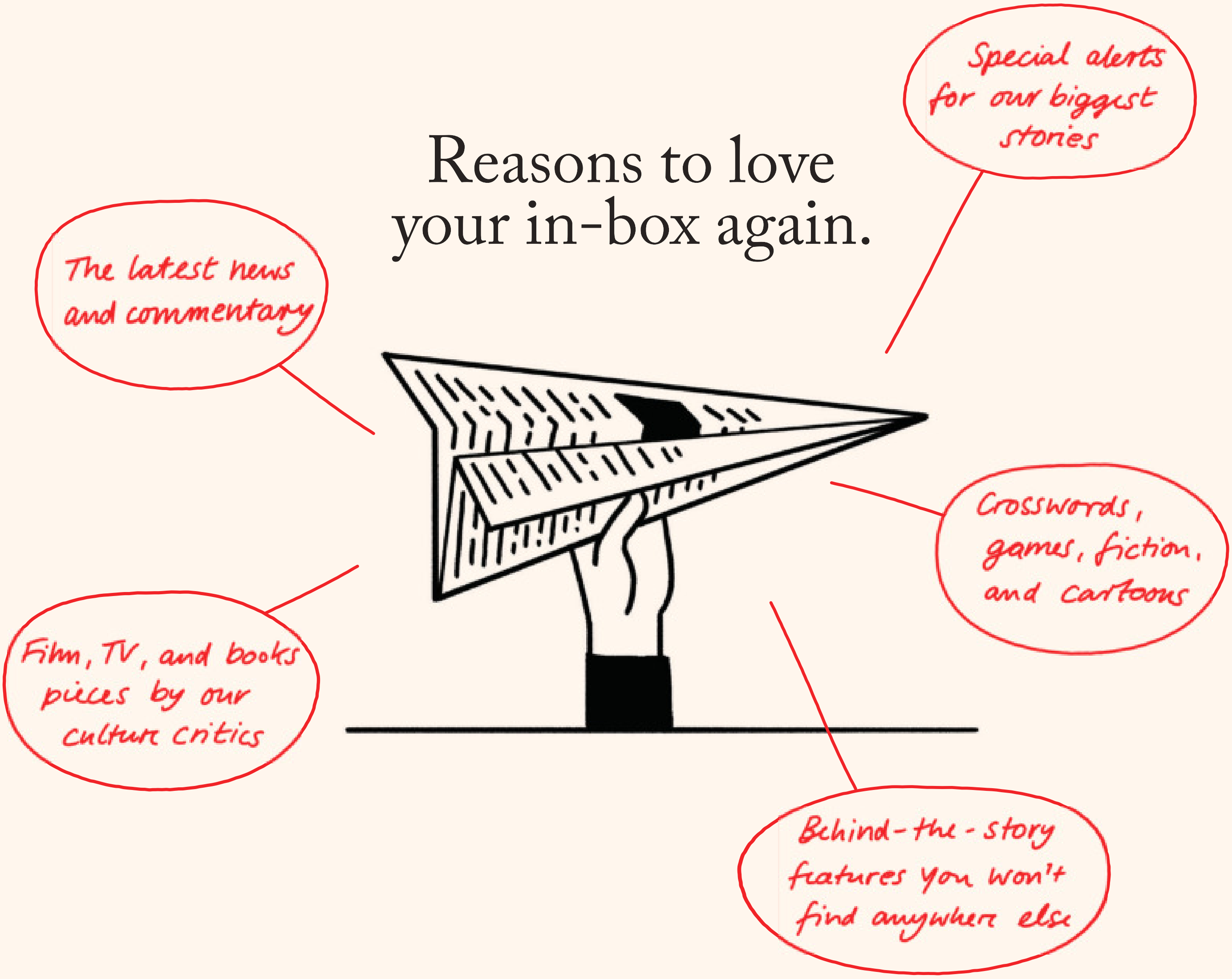


"It's not 'my friend'—it's a desk lamp."
Chris Schlekat, Durham, N.C.

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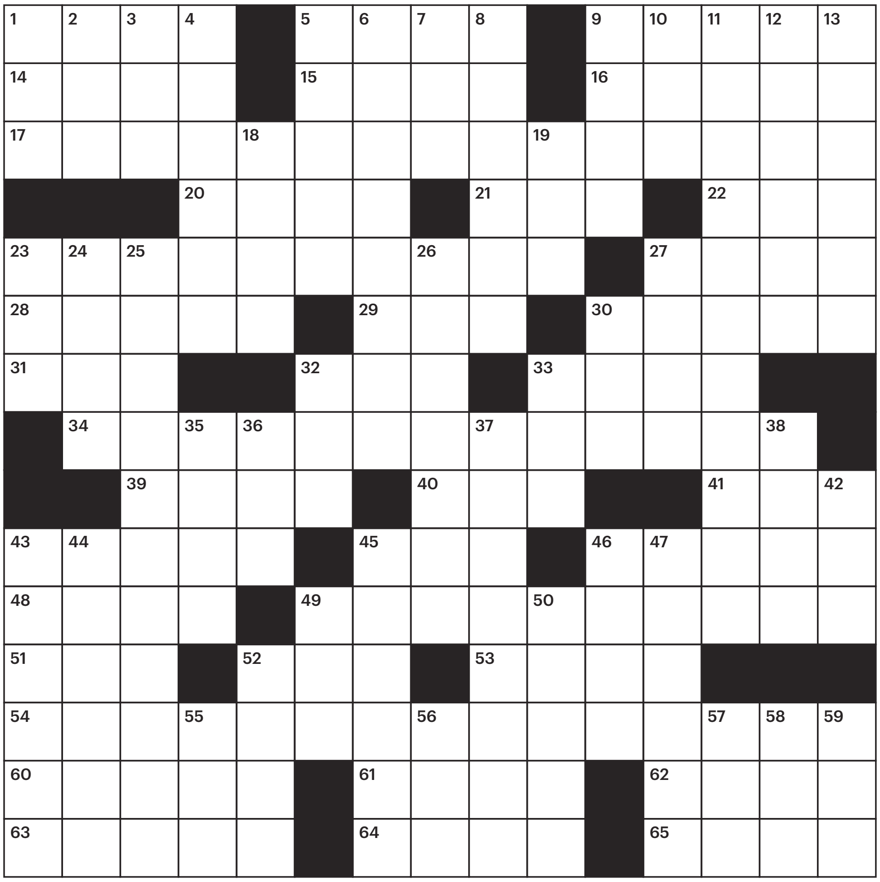
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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

SEEING THINGS

A themed crossword.

BY EMILY CARROLL



ACROSS

1 Stitched line
5 In-box clutter
9 Grp. concerned with toy safety?
14 Hotel chain with a hibiscus logo
15 Anxiously walk around
16 The Rockies' ___ Field
17 Places of worship for many Tibetans
20 Fat sometimes added to bird feed
21 Intense vexation
22 Part of a scholar's e-mail address
23 Features of some margaritas
27 Something unpleasant in the air
28 Goody Two-Shoes
29 Valuable hole card in Texas hold 'em
30 Demean
31 Page to visit before calling a help desk
32 Docs' bloc
33 "Once ___ a Mattress"
34 Parameters for a construction project . . . or, read another way, what the last words of 17-, 23-, 49-, and 54-Across might be used for?
39 Actress and activist King who was the first openly transgender competitor on "America's Next Top Model"
40 Bill at a bar
41 Ages and ages
43 Put the ___ to the metal
45 In favor of
46 Cosmic retribution
48 Sheedy of "Single Drunk Female"
49 Camera attachments with variable focal lengths
51 "Brain" of a PC
52 Destination for cosmonauts, once
53 Currency in Córdoba
54 Structure that provides a direct pedestrian route between Chinatown and downtown Brooklyn
60 Neckwear often made of silk
61 Casino buy-in
62 Proper ___
63 Like three of Justin Verlander's M.L.B. games
64 Back talk
65 Mind, as sheep

DOWN

1 Cry uncontrollably
2 Creature on Australia's coat of arms
3 "Furthermore . . ."
4 Central positions
5 Observed furtively
6 Deli meat often served on rye
7 Appear onstage, e.g.
8 Period of well-earned self-indulgence, perhaps
9 Company patronized by Wile E. Coyote
10 ___ up (absorb)
11 Performers of fireman spins and aerial inverts
12 Words to live by
13 "Everything's fine, I ___ you"
18 What paint swatches preview
19 Ambulances' destinations, briefly
23 Letters on a Coppertone bottle
24 Many an Omani
25 Boozy midday outing
26 Confident playground retort
27 Part of a wind section
30 Smartphone download
32 TV-program interruptions
33 Type of port for a flash drive
35 "My word!"
36 Lead-in to Yachty or Wayne
37 Clothing
38 A handful
42 "Hip Hop Is Dead" artist
43 Arcade character chased by Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde
44 City that's home to the Sun Bowl
45 Abe who resigned from the Supreme Court after accepting a (later returned) $20,000 consulting fee
46 Golden State Warriors coach Steve
47 Designate, as one's successor
49 Pimple
50 K-Y Jelly and Astroglide, for two
52 "Futurama" creator Groening
55 ___ polloi (common folk)
56 "Blonde" Oscar nominee de Armas
57 Stag's mate
58 Piece of laser-tag equipment
59 Conclusion

Solution to the previous puzzle:

F	L	I	R	T		B	R	A	S			M	G	M
L	U	N	A	R	P	R	O	B	E		H	A	R	E
O	N	T	H	E	L	O	O	S	E		O	P	E	N
E	G	O		L	A	O	S		H	U	R	L	E	D
			S	L	I	M		G	E	N	D	E	R	S
O	R	I	G	I	N	S	T	O	R	I	E	S		
C	E	N	T	S		T	I	L	E	X		Y	A	P
H	I	S	S			I	T	D			D	R	N	O
O	N	E		N	I	C	H	E		B	O	U	T	S
		C	H	I	C	K	E	N	P	O	T	P	I	E
P	E	T	I	T	E	S		S	A	N	E			
A	M	B	L	E	D		S	P	I	N		F	D	R
R	A	I	L		A	L	P	I	N	E	G	O	A	T
K	I	T	S		M	A	R	K	E	T	R	A	T	E
A	L	E			S	T	Y	E		S	E	L	E	S

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at
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